The freeplay of meaning gone to extreme: An oriental critique on Derrida[1]

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Abstract

Through deconstruction, Jacques Derrida refutes the possibility of knowledge and meaning and moves toward extreme skepticism. A chief Derridean assumption is that the fully free play of meaning runs against origin and logos. The present paper, however, endeavors to throw critical light on Derrida's anti-logos theory, and to this end, the eastern philosopher Avicenna will be drawn on. Avicennian Ultimate Cause Theory applied, deconstruction will be re-visited arguing that signifiers naturally call for a starting place from which they may initiate signification. Nevertheless, it will follow that logos is not an obstacle against the semantic free flow; rather, meaning circulates freely as a result of infinite similarities among signs, all operating under the auspices of the logos.

Keywords: Avicenna; deconstruction; logos; freeplay; *Ultimate Cause Theory*.

Introduction

"In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration" (Plato, 1994: 48).

"Language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" (Derrida, 1978: 358). Derrida's statement which first appeared in his famous 1966 lecture at Johns Hopkins University is illuminating enough of the critical trend he launched under the title of deconstruction. Running against classical views of meaning as either fixed or predetermined, Derridean deconstruction assumed to unsettle the long-held convictions that would diminish meaning to authorial intentions, the supposed organic unity of the text, or to the consciousness of elite readers. Deconstruction

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declares, and does it clearly, that text contains irreducible contradictory interpretations; the status which was later termed *aporia* (Norris, 2002: 48). More interestingly, literary discourse does not preclude Derrida's critical efforts; he holds that all discourses, literary, critical, philosophical and rhetorical, are equally subject to the play of meaning (ibid 23).

Expounding theory and practice of deconstruction through *Writing and Difference*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Of Grammatology* (all released during his annus mirabilis 1967), Derrida condemns the philosophical tendency to prioritize speech over writing and argues that throughout the western metaphysics speech has been associated with presence and accessibility of meaning, while the latter form unsettles the illusion of the stable meaning by removing such (pseudo-) origins as author and logos and encourages infinitude and polysemy (2002: 30). Derrida's most famous assertion comes from the same book in which the term deconstruction appeared for the first time, *Of Grammatology*: "there is nothing outside the text", (il n'y a pas de hors-texte) (Derrida, 1997: 158). He concentrates his philoso/critical attempts on text, and text alone undercuts contextual authorities of any kind. As such, deconstruction legitimizes the fully free play of meaning regardless of the type of the discourse(s) the text has given scope to. To declare his disapproval of fixity and to embrace heterogeneity, Derrida, in line with his mentor Nietzche, writes in a putatively obfuscationist style.

David Lodge's comments illuminate further what is meant by the irreducible contradictions, or what is conveniently called the blind spots of the text. Anthologizing Derrida's *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*, he regards deconstructive criticism as aiming to show that any text inevitably undermines its own claim to have a determinate meaning, and licenses the reader to produce his own meanings out of it by an activity of semantic 'freeplay'" (2000: 88).

In this view, text comprises of a set of contradictions which lie at each other's throats, and by being so, meaning is pushed to an ephemeral state due to which text, in the wake of reading, demands novel interpretations; each interpretation furthering the demand. To endorse the campaign, Derrida brings himself to throwing critical light on western philosophy. The poststructuralist theoretician assumes that western thought systems have never been able to do away with the notion of structurality or center. There has always been a center working as the ultimate referent to which signification has stuck as an anchor. This center, Derrida assumes, has performed under such chronologically varying designations as God, logos, consciousness, man, truth all working as a linked succession merely to perpetuate the axis. Nonetheless, he maintains, a varying center cannot be thought of as an origin:

[...] henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come to play (1978: 353-4).

In absence of a transcendental signified to hinder semantic circulation, the poststructuralist thinker proceeds toward assuming that discourse leads to infinite play of signification. Derrida disbelieves in origins to the point that - for all his indebtedness - even as Heidegger comes to consider the moment of being as the authentic ground for thought, he bursts out to relegate it to "another classic case of the familiar metaphysical hankering after truth and origins" (2002: 68). Yet unlike Heidegger, Nietzsche disputes western metaphysicality and persuades Derrida to exult over the sight of "a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation" (1978: 369). To him "truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions [...] coins which have their obverse effaced and which are no longer of value as coins but only as metal [...] " (cited in 1997: xxii).

Critique: Avicenna and the logic of The Ultimate Cause

Any new philosophical school, though it reject[s] all previous opinions, is bound to answer the old [...] questions. But we give no answer to philosophical questions, and instead reject all philosophical questions [...] (Carnap, 2011: 5).

Derrida's volumes are regarded as seminal contributions to the theory of poststructuralism, and his ideas have made strong echoes across such fields as literature, architecture, sociology, and cultural studies. Nonetheless, he has been often criticized for the nihilism his theory inadvertently partakes of (Wolin, 1992: xiii). Additionally, John Searle did not find clarity in Derrida's philosophic discourse and at a time even accused him of sophistry (Derrida, 1988). Although Derrida's contribution to the postmodern theory is beyond argument, his standpoint toward logos can be examined critically by drawing on the (onto)logical vantage point of the eastern philosopher Avicenna (980-1037).

Whereas his contribution to medical sciences are unquestionably significant, Avicenna is better appreciated for his achievements in philosophy**,** his best-known philosophical volume being *Book of Healing* (*Kitab al-Shifà*), which is a constellation of treatises on Aristotelian logic, metaphysics, psychology and natural sciences. Much in the spirit of Aristotle, Avicenna was initially preoccupied with *aporiai* or philosophical puzzlement (Afnan, 1989: 109). In order to obtain resolution,

Avicenna sought ontological exposition in metaphysics. The eastern philosopher commences with ontological analysis of the modalities of being; namely impossibility, contingency, and necessity (1989: 116). He explains that while the impossible being is that which cannot come to existence, the contingent-in-itself (*mumkin bi-dhatihi*) has the potential to be or not to be. When actualized, the contingent becomes a "necessary existent due to what is other than itself" (*wajib al-wujud bi-ghayrihi*). Consequently, contingency is a potential being and it may only be actualized by an external cause other than itself. To further the existential realm, he adds that the metaphysical structures of necessity and contingency are highly dissimilar. Avicenna argued that existence cannot follow from the essence of existing things, or that form and matter by themselves cannot collaborate to bring about the developing actualization of the existing things (Belo, 2007: 75). The cause of matter is form in conjunction with a separate agent, or *active intelligence*, which Avicenna calls the Giver of Forms, "and in the last resort is God himself" (1989: 112). Between the existential modalities Avicenna presents, what necessarily intervenes is *creation*, which takes place in successive stages of emanation from "the Supremely Necessary Being who is God" (ibid: 116). Necessary being due to itself (*wajib al-wujud bi-dhatihi*) is true in itself, while the contingent being has a conditional character and is false in itself and at the same time true due to something other than itself. The necessary due to itself, Avicenna concludes, is the source of its own being without being emanated from another existence and therefore always exists (Avicenna, 1975: 36).

The theory of the necessary due to itself or *wajib al-wujud*, which for the sake of convenience we call The Ultimate Cause Theory, is capable to allow for critiquing Derridean disappearance of logos at the sight of freeplay. Cause and effect relationship, regarded as a chain connecting one effect to its cause, then turning itself into an effect calling for another cause is the essence of how Avicenna explains the universe. Avicenna argues this chain must stop somewhere in order to make possible the existence of lower causes in the chain. He calls that ultimate cause wajib al-wujud, or the necessary being due to itself. Naturally, he argues, if Logos - best exemplified here by wajib al-wujud - does not exist, all lower causes in the chain would collapse and/or would not come to existence in the first place (Wisnovsky, 2003: 227). Based on this ontologically upward perspective, one may rightly argue that every sign in the universe - whether written, objective or else - implies the existence of (a set of) higher causes, leading ultimately to wajib al-wujud or logos.

Insofar as the Ultimate Cause Theory is concerned, wajib al-wujud is the origin of the signs. Eastern theo/teleology adheres to an ultra-natural concept to make an apology for our world of signs. In this oriental framework, every sign is an indicator of numerous greater chains of signs which ultimately anchor in the same land from which they take origin both physically and

semantically. Derrida, from another angle, notes the heterogeneous paths signification may take from text, and warns against logos as limiting the circulation of meaning. To Derrida, text, and no authority beyond the text, is able to propel the inexhaustible rocket of meanings, which more than often take heterogonous trails. Despite Derrida's claim, a retrospective look at the bottom of the rocket reveals how indebted signification is to logos in the first place. From an Avicennian viewpoint, logos is the original disseminator of meaning(s): it is the Ultimate Cause from which signs are emanated and to which their existence is contingent. Derrida makes every effort to refute the actuality of center, while from the logical standpoint of Avicenna, center - under the title of axis, pivot, structure or any other designation - is the starting point to help to actualize the existence of signs and of signification. In big picture, aporia, once Aristotelian and now Derridean, is not obstructed by the center from which it may take its existence. Free circularity cannot stand at odds with the center from which it derives its provisional status: In Avicennian language, logos is the necessary being to help to make realized the actuality of free signification.

Compromise and Supplementation:

Thus far it is argued that logos does not infringe on semantic heterogeneity; it is even the only cause to actualize it. However, with this logical fundamentalist view as Avicenna suggests, how can one account for the actuality of polysemy in the face of logos; how is it that various contradictory meanings are wrung out of the same text despite the fact they all rhizome, in a Deleuzian image, from the one and the same stalk; to put it in simple tongue, how can one settle between the Avicennian idea of the authentic origin and the Derridean veracity of multiple meanings. To make such a settlement, one feels obliged to illuminate the nature of the relationship among signs, or between the signifier and the signified in particular. As a (post)structuralist assumption, any natural perception of the relationship between signifier and the signified is illusory (2002: 128). On the other side, the (theo)logical view offered by Avicenna signposts us to the cause-and-effect chain. From a logical viewpoint, finally, the desired settlement follows from the convergence of the two. The relationship, as for its nature, can best be characterized as based on similarities between signs. Such a view encourages the fully free play of meaning, while concurrently it does not dispute the actuality of logos. Different signs/concepts e.g. bicycle, shopping, tree, catching cold, etc. - while classifiable in due categories - all fall under the broad term of existents. "It becomes clear that the only thing that they all share in common [...] is that they are existents" (McGinnis, 2010: 152). As signs unanimously share this category, one can straightforwardly find infinite similarities among them, even between the least likely to share a feature. Let us examine autumn and woman as two seemingly disparate signs. Although the signs belong to different localized categories, both are

existents (albeit the former concept-temporal and the latter objective) and share such grounds the category of the existents may offer; and in this case, they hold in common attraction and ripeness (hence coupling of the two in the second stanza metaphor in John Keats' To Autumn). With a push, the infinite similarities give way to fully free play of meaning: sharing feature enables a signifier to move from one signified to another, and the infinite similarities among signs render the circulation unstoppable. Let us consider another example in the light of this new perspective. As a result of the restless signified-signifier circulation, the initially innocent sentence "The office was open" gives way to an assortment of diverse interpretations: "The office is not open now; the office might be open now; the office men were open to criticism; the office men are intolerant of criticism; the office women had an open mind for negotiation; Last night the office was burgled for it was not locked; … ."

Regarding the example, what brings about multiplicity in meaning is (not necessarily the absence of logos, but) the countless inevitable similarities among the concepts/signs office, office men, and office door; or between physically open (as for door) and mentally open (as per mind), etc. Sharing features, or more simply similarity, is what facilitates for the linguistic sign office to move from signifying one thing to indicating others. Similarity lubricates free circulation and encourages the progressive development of any signified to signifiers as the signification furthers itself, or as the obsessive "interpretation of interpretation" demands (1978: 370). Derrida assumption was that any illusion of center has, in the long course of history, kept a tight rein on the freeplay of meaning, while from a broader vantage point, the very center makes possible the existence of contingent signs from which free circulation originates. In the first place, if there had been no center, there would have come to place no signification from which to start any semantic play. Although meaning may circulate generously from one to other layers, it does not nullify the center from which it borrows its existence. In this combined picture, free circularity is a result of ceaseless similarities among the signs emanating from and working under the auspices of logos. Consequently, one can add to "There is nothing outside the text" the supplement that "but the text, not just to be the infinitude as it is, prerequires an origin, from which to proceed and under the egis of which to circulate in freeplay.

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