
Part V

Unnatural Humanisms and Post-Civilized Minds

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Human Nature and Unnatural Humanisms

We have arrived at a new moment, or perhaps a new crisis, in the old discussion about humanism. All intellectual metaphors limp, and the one we shall begin with has probably also been overused; but it would not be too far off the mark to say that many of our most influential philosophers have shifted from conducting a kind of orderly Newtonian reflection on man to producing a kind of discontinuous post-Einsteinian dispersion of discourse into scattered fragments and evanescent traces (the appropriateness of this semi-barbaric rhetoric will become clearer below). In spite of the seeming hopelessness of the attempt, it is worth our while to try to make some sense of these scattered fragments and traces, first by identifying the structure of thought that lies behind their production; second, by sorting them into some intelligible categories--an anatomy of contemporary humanisms--and finally, by suggesting some ways to move beyond the impasse presented by postmodern "humanism."

Let us be clear about how what we will call postmodern humanism differs from the old modern variety. The old humanism, Newtonian humanism if you will, moved through largely regular and predictable orbits. In the period before and just after the Second World War, for example, a Catholic like Jacques Maritain and an agnostic like Albert Camus began their speculations on humanism by trying to avoid the false extremes of totalitarian communities (Communism and Fascism) on the one hand, and a radical bourgeois individualism on the other.

In addition, they both rejected the false opposition of theism and humanism. Camus's first sentence in *L'Homme Révolté*, "There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic," also reflects an honest analysis of the experience of the first half of the twentieth century, in which logical constructions of one kind or another resulted in unprecedented slaugh-

ters.¹ Organized atheist humanism could never again assume easy superiority to organized religion--in fact, humanism's excesses have proved to be far worse than religion's. Both Camus and Maritain sought a humanism based primarily on a common-sense, nonideological view of human nature and human community that did not rule out God.

The odd thing—and here is the crux of the new moment in thinking about humanism—is that in the last few decades Marxism, individualism, and the very idea of human nature have become very weak forces in public discourse, whatever residual appeal each has in particular circles. Modern philosophical and literary currents display a wide spectrum of alternatives to classical humanism; but the strongest contemporary currents draw on a common and pervasive force that denies the very possibility of human nature and shall be our principal focus here: the deconstruction movement.

The difficulties of understanding deconstruction are notorious. The language of many deconstructionists is all but impenetrable. The deconstructive method seems to undercut systematically any formulation of its own basic concepts. In fact, both the very notion of an origin or a basis, and every relationship of concepts to such points of departure, are precisely what deconstruction deconstructs. A joke about these difficulties gets the feeling of most readers exactly right. Question: "What do you get from a *mafioso* who is a deconstructionist?" Answer: "An offer you cannot understand."

Unfortunately, it is imperative that *we* do understand if not everything about deconstruction, at least its general implications and influence in contemporary intellectual life. If Maritain—or Camus—were alive today, they would recognize the centrality of this movement to the understanding of our whole culture, starting with what might seem an absurd question: Is the assertion that we can know something about the order of things and can communicate that knowledge Fascist? Does the very concept of transcendent meaning immediately impose on and ultimately threaten human liberty? These are not merely academic questions, because while the deconstruction movement flourishes primarily on the campuses—in France, America, and elsewhere—it has wide-ranging implications for the world outside.²

¹Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 3.

²For example, in the essay "Violence and Metaphysics" (where the

Take for example, the following statement of an intellectual program by one of the leading expositors of deconstruction:

Let us give up 'literature' for *writing* [that is, *écriture* in the deconstructionist sense]. In doing so, we forego 'meaning,' the 'final signified,' the 'author,' 'law,' 'science,' and ultimately 'God.' We accept the freeplay of the world and of signs without truth and without origin. We go beyond humanistic man.³

That last phrase, "go beyond humanistic man," is ominous and significant. Paradoxically, it is in the *Humanities* departments of the universities that this anti- or metahumanism is being disseminated. The task is nothing less than a grand revision or reversal of Western metaphysics through an attack on language. The same author quotes Martin Heidegger approvingly about the difficulty of overthrowing traditional metaphysics:

That difficulty lies in language. Our Western languages are languages of metaphysical thinking, each in its own way. It must remain an open question whether the nature of Western languages is in itself marked with the exclusive brand of metaphysics, and thus marked permanently by onto-theo-logic, or whether these languages offer other possibilities of utterance—and that means at the same time of a telling silence.⁴

two terms are viewed as virtually synonymous), Jacques Derrida puts the deconstructionist indictment in its most comprehensive form. For him the Greek *logos* and all similar concepts that serve as a foundation for meaning are "an oppression certainly comparable to none other in the world, an ontological or transcendental oppression, but also the origin or alibi of all oppression in the world." Thus all traditional religious, philosophical, and scientific views of the world point inevitably, says Derrida, toward Nazism. See Derrida's *Writing and Différance*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 83.

³Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 104-05.

⁴*Ibid.*, 68.

Why such a process needs to be carried out is telling, too: "As functions, God, Author, Phallus, Being, Center all play a similar role: they reduce the flight of the sign and close the space of interpretation in a determination of stable meaning or truth."⁵ Roughly speaking, the deconstructionist abhors God, Author, Phallus, Being, Center, stable meaning, and truth for the same reason that a theist abhors strict materialism: each seems to fix human life into a straitjacket with no room for freedom. The deconstructionist alternative is a free, if empty, play of "the world and of signs without truth and without origin."

In light of this metahumanism, many traditional quarrels pale. No longer is the threat an attempt to reduce man to an animal in a tribe as in Fascism. Nor is Marxist humanism through collectivist tyranny the problem. You cannot even call this vision anthropocentric because it eventually deconstructs the substantial *anthropos* as much as anything. This is not a classical skepticism either. Skepticism at least had the good sense to leave the skeptic intact. After meeting deconstructionists, the Biblical Fundamentalist who abhors *secular humanism* should embrace an old Classical Rationalist--say Voltaire--like a beloved long-lost brother. At least both of them believe that a human nature exists and that human beings exercise the power of reason, whatever ultimate role they assign to reason. By comparison, the new *metahumanist*, if that is what he is, belongs to an entirely different mental species.

All of this is important because deconstructive assaults on Western thought will energize many combatants in the *Kulturkampf* of the next few years, whatever the academic fortunes of specific fashions like deconstruction. Marxism, secular humanism, and other Newtonian humanisms will continue to exert some influence; but the drive to desubstantialize the world has deep currents in our culture and will find other modes of expression even if the dominant modes of today fade. Deconstruction traces its origins from Martin Heidegger through his student, Jacques Derrida. William Barrett has rightly observed that while much can be said immediately against a desubstantializing philosophy like that of Heidegger, we should realize that Heidegger

cannot be dismissed; that desolate and empty picture of being he gives us may be just that sense of being that is at work in our whole

⁵*Ibid.*, 54.

culture, and we are in his debt for having brought it to the surface. To get beyond him we shall have to live through that sense of being in order to reach the other side.⁶

I. Humanism in Sartre and Heidegger

As a first step towards reaching that other side, let us look briefly at two crucial figures in the development of modern humanism—Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre. Though Sartre's work is based on his reading of Heidegger, we will begin with Sartre because he developed an explicitly existential humanism that Heidegger later repudiated on significant grounds.

Existentialism, at least by that name, has already become a rather stale philosophical movement, but the basic views elaborated by Sartre in a text such as his 1946 lecture, *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*⁷ continue in circulation under other guises. In existentialist forms of humanism, "we must begin from the subjective," says Sartre. Following, he thinks, Heidegger, Sartre declares that existence precedes essence, and, therefore, "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism." Many have taken this as a license for caprice and avant-garde self-indulgence, says Sartre; but, he warns sternly, in reality this is "the least scandalous and the most austere" of teachings. It places the responsibility for his life—and the lives of others—precisely on each individual's shoulders. We are responsible for the principles we choose and the passions we allow to guide us. Freedom and responsibility are total.

At first glance, this seems to resemble the radical individualism of the earlier individualism/totalitarianism opposition, but Sartre denies that his thoroughgoing subjectivity is bourgeois. For him, "God is dead," and he quite correctly points out that this has consequences, among them Dostoyevsky's "everything is permitted." This saying is not a justification of everything, argues Sartre, merely the clear-sighted recognition that

⁶William Barrett, *Death of the Soul: From Descartes to the Computer* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1986), 140.

⁷For a convenient translation of this lecture see Walter Kaufmann's *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1967), 287-311.

there is nothing outside of man by which to judge choices. In fact, even if God existed, he says, *we* would have to choose to understand how he wants us to act. For Sartre subjectivity, in the Cartesian sense, is inescapable.

There is one way out of this apparent solitude, however, in that we must recognize other people as constitutive of our own selves and freedom. The argument here takes a strange twist and should be followed carefully. Sartre has already laid down as a bedrock rule that "in reality and for the existentialist, there is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love other than that which is manifested in loving; there is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art." Yet who is to decide whether any of these conditions have been fulfilled in fact? If it is the actor himself, he may be self-deceived. Oddly, Sartre puts the judgment of whether these things have actually occurred into the hands of others. His existentialist

recognizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense that one says one is spiritual, or that one is wicked and jealous) unless others recognize him as such. I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself. Under these conditions, the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time a revelation of the other as a freedom which confronts mine, and which cannot think or will without doing so either for or against me. Thus, at once, we find ourselves in a world which is, let us say, that of *inter-subjectivity*. It is in this world that man has to decide what he is and what others are.⁸

In such a world, there can be no fixed human nature, although *conditions* repeat themselves often enough that human choices in those conditions will be broadly understandable. The old philosophies of human nature made man a fixed end, says Sartre, and even in secularized forms like Comte's, they inevitably lead to Fascism in their imposition of a conceptual frame over man. Man is always to be made: "Man is all the

⁸This resort to inter-subjectivity may permit Sartre to believe that he has escaped becoming a kind of bourgeois *salaud* only concerned about himself; but, as Derrida astutely perceived, existential subjectivity led

time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent [i.e., outside himself, not metaphysical] ends that he himself is able to exist."

II. Heidegger's Reaction

To those only vaguely acquainted with Martin Heidegger, all this may seem to echo with the master's voice; but Heidegger read Sartre's lecture and was horrified. In his reply, *Letter on Humanism* (1947), Heidegger will have nothing to do with this rootless freedom.⁹ His idea of human being (*Dasein* may be translated by those two words among others) situates it squarely within an all-encompassing Being. This is not the place to go into a full investigation of Heidegger's objections to Sartre, but several of the points he makes will be useful in sketching the contours of contemporary anti-humanisms.

Heidegger immediately marks out the difference between Sartre and himself on the matter of existence preceding essence. He admits to having said that the essence of man is his *ek-sistence*, but he does not use these terms in the way of traditional metaphysics. For Heidegger

Metaphysics closes itself to the simple essential fact that man essentially occurs only in his essence, where he is claimed by Being. Only from that claim has he found that wherein his essence dwells. Only from this dwelling *has* he *language* as the home that preserves the ecstatic for his essence. Such standing in the light of Being I call the ek-sistence of man. This way of Being is proper only to man. Ek-sistence so understood is not only the ground of the possibility of reason, *ratio*, but it is also that in which the essence of man preserves the source that determines him.

naturally not so much to inter-subjectivity as to inter-rogation--that is, the mutual questioning of one another that ultimately deconstructs every position, not by refuting it, but by showing that, on existential principle, it never had substantial reality in the first place.

⁹For a good English translation of this text see Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 193-242.

As many commentators point out, in passages such as these, Being, despite all protestations by Heidegger, appears like nothing so much as the traditional ground that created the world--that is, God. Heidegger is careful to note differences between his concepts of Being and existence and those of the medievals, Hegel, and Nietzsche (as Heidegger construed him), but he shares with these thinkers a firm sense that man is defined by something absolute, outside of himself, however obscure this Heideggerian Being may be in comparison with the traditional metaphysics of presence. Heidegger thinks of Being as "mysterious, the simple nearness of an unobtrusive governance....What is essential is not man but Being." In the open space of the self-giving of Being, man takes on his proper and profound dignity instead of the inauthentic and superficial dignities foisted on him by traditional humanism.¹⁰

For all of his life Heidegger saw this deeper humanism as requiring quiet thought and an organic rootedness in nature, nation, and place. Consequently, he was susceptible to the elements in National Socialism roughly congruent with his own thinking. Though Heidegger made some attempt to explain the complexity of his attitude toward Nazism, his behavior and some of his remarks during World War II were quite simply bad; and even decades later he always avoided a full repudiation of National Socialism. Nor did he ever express horror or even regret over the Holocaust. Many critics saw his political blindness as deriving from philosophical errors.¹¹ No one took up this theme more vehemently than one of Heidegger's students, the father of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida.

¹⁰In spite of the philosophical majesty of this formulation, Heidegger felt compelled to present this Being-being humanism in terms of the peculiarly modern thrill of the abyss. Leo Strauss once characterized existentialism as "a race in which he wins who offers the smallest security and the greatest terror," and predicted Heidegger would win the race. See Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 256.

¹¹For the best accounts of this controversy see Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1969).

III. The Deconstructive Turn

Derrida comes from an Algerian Jewish family and is justifiably sensitive to Heidegger's involvement with the Nazis, but he did not merely denounce the specific political faults he found in Heidegger. Though Derrida acknowledges that without Heidegger his own work would have been impossible, he saw in Heidegger's very assertion of a *proper dignity* of the human being the root of his weakness for Nazism. In the last few years, Derrida has carried this critique to larger and larger circles, until in a recent interview he stated "I believe in the necessity of showing—without limit, if possible--the profound attachment of Heidegger's texts (writings and deeds) to the possibility and reality of *all nazisms*."¹²

This remark, perhaps better than that of any other major contemporary thinker, formulates the predicament in which we find ourselves at the end of the twentieth century: is it possible to have *any* theory of human nature that does not become an intolerable chain on human freedom? In short, do all metaphysics and humanisms inevitably lead to what we may call shorthand totalitarianism? Do systematic views entail totalizing politics?

Heidegger himself had thought he was breaking with all false *metaphysical* systems. To simplify greatly from Heidegger's complex and often murky writing, he sought to deliver humanistic thought from what he regarded as two false strains in the tradition: Platonic transcendence and scientific immanence. Each of these, in his view, had led man to *forget Being* by directing attention to some lesser realm. Heidegger thought that by opening ourselves to Being, a process in some ways similar to mystical contemplation (though Heidegger tried to distinguish his thinking from all previous *onto-theologic* thought), we could retrieve a *dignity proper to man*.

All this seems to the good. False idealism and reductive scientism are the two traditional dangers to an authentic humanism.

For Derrida, though, this was Heidegger's crucial error. In spite of all Heidegger's attempts to get free from Western metaphysical limitations,

¹²Quoted in Thomas Sheehan's article, "Heidegger and the Nazis," in *The New York Review of Books*, June 16, 1988, 47. The original remarks by Derrida appeared in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 6-12, 1987, 173.

said Derrida, he had fallen here precisely into one of those dangerous traps that he sought to avoid. In Heidegger man is a being composed of both absence and presence; he is never simply *there*, because *Dasein* can only be understood fully in light of—mostly absent, for us—Being.¹³ Against the classical *metaphysical* systems, Derrida argues that there is no *proper* dignity to man because there is no human nature that may be properly described. The only way in which we may describe human nature is in human language; and human language, by *its* nature, is a compound of the sign and something else, a kind of non-distinct shadow that simultaneously gives rise to verbal meaning and subverts it. Both the speaker and the human nature being spoken about are situated within this network of language and, therefore, themselves are deconstructed by the nature of the linguistic sign. It is not simply that language raises doubts about an existing reality. Derrida's linguistic analysis argues that this would make deconstruction a fall from presence. In Derrida there was never any presence there to begin with. The origin is a non-origin, and deconstruction is merely the recognition of this predicament.

To understand what Derrida means by this requires us to look at his theory more fully.¹⁴ In many of the principal texts of Derrida's most fruitful period,¹⁵ an opposition of a sort is set up between the classic age

¹³In a further development of Heidegger, Derrida also disputed the role of Being as a kind of guarantor of meaning and beings—a role, Derrida correctly perceived, analogous to God's in classic metaphysics. For Derrida's essay responding to the Sartre-Heidegger humanism debate, see his "The Ends of Man," *The Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109-36.

¹⁴Though the analysis that follows seeks to bring clarity of concept and language to an almost always confusing subject, as it advances into the *arcana* of deconstruction, it inevitably begins to reproduce some of its style. Deconstruction labors against the most natural pathways of Western languages, and any attempt to explain deconstruction finds itself involved in this linguistic turmoil. The reader who finds himself stranded in orbit by this explication might prefer to try re-entry by skipping to Part VI (Political Humanisms of Deconstruction) of this essay.

¹⁵The most important titles from this very fecund period (around 1968) include at least the following: *La Voix et le Phenomene*, *De la Grammatologie*, *Marges de la Philosophie*, and *L'Écriture et la Différance*.

of Western metaphysics and something that is *after* or *outside* or *on the margins* of that epoch. In some ways Derrida's thinking here repeats Heidegger's well-known attempt to get behind or beyond Western metaphysics; but for Derrida, Heidegger himself is part of the very epoch he hoped to escape. In *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere, Derrida often says that we can now begin to glimpse the "closure [*clôture*] of the metaphysical epoch."

The very idea of the "closure of an epoch" is, in deconstructive terms, problematic because to speak of such a concept carries with it obvious ties to a *metaphysical* discourse. The "closure of an epoch" seems to posit a conceptually stable, simply *past* presence that may be referred to with confidence, a variation on the classic *in illo tempore*. Strictly speaking, deconstruction does not permit belief in such a historical reality because there is *always already* [*toujours déjà*] at work, in the concept and in the attempt to demarcate the period, a kind of writing that produces discourse distinct from a subject that was never simply *there* in the first place. Any text from that period would be equally inaccessible, strictly speaking, because any text produced *about* the earlier text exists as irreducibly different.¹⁶

"Closure" in Derrida does not mean the *end* of the metaphysical epoch. Probably the best place to examine this distinction is in the *Exergue* to *Of Grammatology*. There Derrida lays out the difficulties of his *science of writing*, [that is, grammatology] explicitly in terms of its relationship to the closure of the metaphysical epoch:

such a science of writing runs the risk of never being established as such and with that name. Of never being able to define the unity of its project or its object. Of not being able either to write its discourse on method or to describe the limits of its field. For essential reasons: the unity of all that allows itself to be attempted today through the most diverse concepts of science and writing, is, in principle, more or less covertly yet always, determined by an historico-metaphysical epoch of which we merely glimpse the closure. I do not say the end.

¹⁶One of the Yale school of *boa deconstructors*, Harold Bloom, has formulated this as "All reading is misreading." Other deconstructionist slogans make the same point: "All texts are pretexts," and "All interpretations are interpretations of interpretations." See below for the deconstructive meanings of the term "*différance*."

Grammatology, then, finds itself obliged to use a language that is hostile at its very core to what grammatology seeks to establish, perhaps makes that meaning impossible to express fully.

The idea of science and the idea of writing—therefore also of the science of writing — is meaningful for us only in terms of an origin and within a world to which a certain concept of the sign (later I shall call it *the* concept of the sign) and a certain concept of the relationship between speech and writing have already been assigned. A most determined relationship, in spite of its privileges, its necessity, and the field of vision that it has controlled for a few millennia, especially in the West, to the point of being now able to produce its own dislocation and itself proclaim its limits.

The science of writing that Derrida has in mind must carry out a double operation. Not only must it distinguish itself from the previous metaphysical systems, it must not become a *metaphysical* system in its own right. Even Heidegger, in Derrida's view, had failed at this operation because his reflections on Being became yet another continuation of the Socratic-Platonic metaphysical project in that it sought a final understanding, a kind of *logos*, as well as a *telos* in the openness of human beings to Being. Instead of trying to go *outside* the metaphysical tradition, Derrida transposes his efforts into a different dimension:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it.

Derrida repeatedly chooses the word "closure" to mark this approach to that epoch.

The age of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never end. Its historical closure is, however, outlined....Within the closure, by an oblique and always perilous movement, constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed, it is necessary to surround the critical concepts with a careful and thorough discourse....designate the crevice through which the unnameable glimmer beyond the closure may be glimpsed....For a proper under-

standing of the gesture that we are sketching here, one must understand the expressions 'epoch,' 'closure of an epoch,' 'historical genealogy' in a new way; and must first remove them from all relativism."

IV. Escaping the End of History?

The *new way* may perhaps be best understood in contrast to how a Hegel would have understood the terms listed above. For Hegel, previous philosophical work represented a movement of Absolute Spirit towards self-consciousness in Subjective Spirit. Though past events and philosophical systems can have a double perspective—both as simple events in themselves and as steps in a self-defining cosmic process—what Hegel sought was precisely closure in the sense of a final unity or *end*. The end of history does not mean the end of the world, but an achievement of the Spirit that ever after unites the various processes of reality. In Hegel, there can be no outside that is not absorbed by the dialectic, nor are there "crevices" in the system. Whatever may be glimpsed on the "outside" *must* be capable of integration into Hegel's all-embracing dialectical realization of the Idea.

Deconstruction, however, by its very nature discerns a radical otherness, even in the metaphysical epoch. That epoch is not simply what it presents itself as; it reflects the unsystemizable absence/presence characteristic of everything. Nothing is, for us, simply *there*. For Derrida, everything shows the operation of *différance*, the central term in deconstruction, a term that Derrida once described as "not a concept, and not even a word." "*Différance*" with an 'a' does not exist in French any more than in English. Derrida has coined the word for two purposes. First, he denies that there is any simple presence to the sign we call a word. Much of his rebarbative book *Of Grammatology*¹⁷ seeks to show the falseness of the assumption that spoken language is a simple presence of which written language is a derivative. *Différance* is spelled the way it is because it is a word than can only be properly appreciated when written. It forces us, therefore, to recognize that all language, says Derrida, is a form of *writing*, in the sense that it is a human product rather than a simple, *natural* presence. Even the product should not be regarded as transpar-

¹⁷Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

ent; rather, all language becomes an endless *dissemination*, a production of texts about texts spurred by other texts, *ad infinitum*.

Différance is a kind of non-foundational basis for all signs. Derrida nowhere gives a straightforward definition of it--such a definition would be false to *différance*--but we might simplify his complexifications and say there are two large components to *différance*, one spatial and one temporal.

Every linguistic sign, like every object in the world, is *different* in that it is spatially separated from other objects. A word, for example, is initially recognizable because it is different from all the other words in a language. Nevertheless, a word or object is not *simply* present as a distinct space. All the other words in the language, or all the other objects in the world, are implicit in the very recognition of difference. We cannot, therefore, know this thing as simply, in itself, *there*.

Similarly--and here we come to the second main sense *indifférance*--a word or object is different in that it *defers* finality. In a concrete sense, human language is a way of going on, of not arriving at a final, and therefore dead, appropriation of reality. Deferring the end of thought provides the interspace where human life, as uncertain meaning, goes on.

Even this absence/presence, though glimpsable, cannot be reduced to a system, is not a kingdom of the *trace*¹⁸ or of *différance*, a kingdom that might usurp the governance of presence and unity. In its very nature, the *writing* [*écriture*] that results from *différance* disseminates itself without end, producing texts productive of other texts with no possible return to a point of origin.

This is an important point because otherwise the metaphysical epoch becomes an origin in the very sense that Derrida seeks to deconstruct in other systems. It would play a role in Derrida similar to the role played, for example, by *nature* in Rousseau, or Being in Heidegger. *Différance* would be a simple fall from originary unity, a breaking of the *metaphysical* molds, understandable in terms of unity; but that is precisely what Derrida everywhere seeks to prevent.

¹⁸In deconstruction the *trace* replaces the *data* of metaphysical systems; a *trace*, as the name implies, is as evanescent, and insubstantial, as the trace left by a sub-atomic particle in a cloud chamber. It is more the result of the passage of something unknown than a substantial existence.

In spite of his intentions, however, there are enormous difficulties in denying all originating functions to the *metaphysical epoch*. This becomes most evident when we look at how the concept of *trace* relates to the question of a metaphysical epoch. The movement of thought in Derrida here is, and must be, double. On the one hand, he must look back upon the metaphysical epoch in a way that does not simply make it part of another metaphysical system, does not allow a new system to absorb what is intended to be by nature resistant to all systemization. As he puts it, "To see to it that the beyond does not return to the within is to recognize in the contortion the necessity of a pathway [*parcours*]. That pathway must leave a path in the text." In concrete terms for the subject being addressed here, this means that the very writing about the existence and closure of the metaphysical epoch must contain within it an element that simultaneously shows that no such simple entity preceded the current thinking about it. Paradoxically, the period being looked at must disappear *in a certain way* from the discourse while still persisting. It is only in the self-reflection of writing that Derrida recognizes the *trace* that gives rise to the concept of a metaphysical age in the first place: "The trace is not only the disappearance of the origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin."

However much contrary to common sense notions, this even obliterates the pastness of the past:

[I]f the trace refers to an absolute past, it is because it obliges us to think a past that can no longer be understood in the form of a modified presence, as a present-past, the absolute past that is retained in the trace no longer rigorously merits the name 'past.'

Another name to erase, especially since the strange movement of the trace proclaims as much as it recalls: *différance* defers-differs.

The problem, says Derrida, is similar to the *delayed effect* of Freudian theory in which the presentness of the past and the pastness of the present in the psyche are confounded to such an extent that it calls into question the very terms commonly used such as "time," "now," "anterior present," "delay," and so forth.

Perhaps the most convenient way to understand this relationship between the deconstructed concept of a metaphysical epoch and the *after* represented by the play of writing and difference is to use Derrida's term

brisure ["hinge"], which denotes both a breaking and a connection. The very idea of a *metaphysical epoch* depends, for its existence, on a position that differs from it. This position cannot be wholly without relation to the metaphysical epoch, because that would allow no way to understand, or at least grasp, the *previous epoch*. The *brisure* between these two epochs is both a connection that preserves the inside/outside distinction and a form of writing that invades the words *metaphysical epoch*, *soliciting* (in the deconstruction sense of *stirring up*) the certainties within that epoch but also calling into question the very nature of what is referred to by those two words.

The contrast with Hegel—or even Heidegger—here could not be more stark. However much Hegel believed that his own philosophy represented the final culmination of previous efforts, his system does not alter the nature of earlier thinking, merely its place in the universe of thought.

Nietzsche's destruction of origins takes a further step, says Derrida, and Heidegger's attempt to step outside metaphysics is indispensable.¹⁹

¹⁹We usually assume that Derrida is a more faithful reader of Nietzsche than was Heidegger. Yet in light of examining the *closure of the metaphysical epoch*, it is instructive to try to imagine how the *Eternal Return* could be conceptualized or regarded as real from the standpoint of the "free play of *différance*." Some residual metaphysic of nature continues in Nietzsche that Derrida would try to overlook. How, for example, can we *know* about the Eternal Return unless we have reached a point similar to the end of history? Or how, for that matter, can we arrive at a recognition of the free play of signs without some similar standpoint at the end of history? See, for example, the paragraph at the end of Derrida's highly influential "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Social Sciences," which asserts a *metaphysical* view of the world as surely as any traditional system did, "Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is, therefore, the saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean affirmation, that is, the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of the world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. This affirmation then determines the noncenter otherwise

For Derrida the erasure of simple being must invade even simple *historical* categorization. Even the use of the term "invade" here, though appropriate from one point of view, is inappropriate from Derrida's. For Derrida, there is no simple, secure preserve to be *in-vaded*; the assault from the *outside* is already *within* the closure. Since the metaphysical conception of this history has *always already* been destabilized by elements Derrida reveals, the invasion is really nothing more than a recognition.

V. A Non-Linearist History

All of these aspects of Derrida's thinking about the *closure* of an epoch contribute to a view of history in which the past is also present and the present absent. Derrida explains that this does not reduce everything to uniformity:

This pluri-dimensionality does not paralyze history within simultaneity, it corresponds to another level of historical experience, and one may just as well consider, conversely, linear thought as a reduction of history....Simultaneity coordinates two absolute presents, two points or instants of presence, and it remains a linearist concept.

than as loss of the center, and it plays without security. For there is a sure play: that which is limited to the substitution of given and existing, present, pieces. In absolute chance affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace" (in *Writing and Différance*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 292). Derrida has second thoughts about the innocence of the Nietzschean affirmation in *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronnell (New York: Schocken Press, 1985), since the Nazis found plenty of ways to adapt Nietzsche for their purposes; but, even here, we may remark how the genetic indetermination is in danger, if that is the right way of putting it, of becoming a kind of metaphysic all its own. The Eternal Return is Nietzsche's sorrowful (see Zarathustra's slowness in affirming the realization) recognition of some pattern in the otherwise *baseless* play of the world, pure play alone could never give rise to the reality or the concept of Eternal Return.

Likewise, the major figures in the history of thought come under this pluri-dimensionality. Derrida describes as frivolous the belief that *Descartes, Leibniz, Rousseau, Hegel*, are simple identities or causes any more than are abstractions such as the *French Eighteenth Century*: "The indicative value that I attribute to them is first the name of a problem." This attitude, which undercuts the reading of major Western texts of the past, performs a similar operation on contemporary texts.

Clearly, this not only undercuts common-sense views of historicity, but those of a historicist like Hegel as well. At the extreme, Hegel would have assimilated history to the history of philosophy; but in Derrida, such a philosophical appropriation is impossible because the very history of philosophy is part of the metaphysical age in which several systems had transparent, simply present, meanings. This history of philosophy is *supplemented* by what grammatology brings to its deciphering: it brings *writing* to the reading of that history.

Hegel's formula must be taken literally: history is nothing but the history of philosophy; absolute knowledge is fulfilled. What exceeds this closure is *nothing*: neither presence of being, nor meaning, neither history nor philosophy; but another thing that has no name, which announces itself within the thought of this closure and guides our writing here.

This *nothing* that guides the writing insures that the origin is never simple but is always already *supplemented*, or possessed by an obscure shadow. All commentary on that supplement is merely the supplement of a supplement, never a return to absolute origins. Seeking to deconstruct the metaphysical epoch does not arrive at a different *understanding* of that epoch in the sense of a new *reading*; it can only be, for Derrida, a *writing* on a text that was already supplemented by writing.

Though this *nothing* hardly seems worth all the fuss deconstruction has caused, no less formidable a critic than George Steiner has warned:

On its own terms and planes of argument, terms by no means trivial if only in respect of their bracing acceptance of ephemerality and self

dissolution, the challenge of deconstruction does seem to me irrefutable."²⁰

Part IX of this essay will explore other terms and planes by which to refute deconstruction; but, first, let us look at its practical implications.

VI. Political Humanisms of Deconstruction

Deconstruction is not merely a question of metaphysics and epistemology. Its practitioners often aim at a worldly program as well, which seeks to displace the classical forms of humanism. Deconstructionists have coined terms such as *phallogocentrism* (Derrida's invention) to get several villains simultaneously into one concept. It is no accident that the highly esoteric program of deconstruction comes down to earth with a program to abolish God, Author, Phallus, Being, and Centers. Each of these aims has clear political counterparts in secularism, multi-culturalism, feminism, relativism, and Third World ideologies. As anyone who has spent time on a university campus recently can attest, the exoticism of deconstructive theory and the homeliness of radical *praxis* seem to sense a kindred spirit in one another.

All of these forms of deconstructive politics also co-exist peacefully with one another and with neo-Marxisms that one scholar classifies as *critical neo-Marxisms* as opposed to scientific Marxism.²¹ The former take an *open* approach to social questions. The latter have resulted in Stalinist regimes such as the Soviet Union. The distinguishing factor in what shall be called here deconstructive political movements is that, like the philosophical base of deconstruction, the revolution is not so much in favor of some alternative as it is in the thorough subverting of every substantial center of social authority.

Though at first sight a freewheeling system such as deconstruction appears to have little to do with the ponderous and tyrannical modes of thought we associate with Marxism, Derrida has described himself an

²⁰George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 132.

²¹See Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1982), xiv.

open Marxist because he recognizes a kindred spirit in the idea of perpetual revolution:

I would reaffirm that there is some possible articulation between an open Marxism and what I am interested in....Marxism presents itself, has presented itself from the beginning with Marx, as an open theory, which was continually to transform itself.²²

From this neo-Marxist perspective, the Western tradition with its metaphysical center and various ways of discriminating value is viewed as an ideology of oppression: "...metaphysics is the infrastructure of ideology, and until that infrastructure is deracinated, ideology will reappear, against the best intentions of revolutionary activists."²³ Metaphysics claims to provide some absolute point of knowledge from which to judge the historical, but this view is mistaken:

The only absoluteness that can be claimed for truth and knowledge is that which characterizes the description of the historical world at a specific moment in the process of material transformation. It is the absoluteness of a relation between two points in two chains which are inseparably interwoven—a linguistic-conceptual chain and the historical world. It is not of the paradigmatic order of an ideal truth, which transcends the seriality of empirical history it describes. Both marxism [sic] and deconstruction suggest that this sort of truth is a fiction.²⁴

How we can *know* that such a truth is a fiction without a concept that belongs to the metaphysical order of truth is a paradox our author does not perceive. He concludes instead: "The most absolute truth would be that which least pretends to absoluteness and instead attends to its own historicity. Fashion would simply be another name for science."

Why does this vision of language, the world, and human nature recommend itself? Fragmentary, meaningless, rootless existence seems

²²*Ibid.*, xv.

²³Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation*, 117.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 214.

precisely the evil fate many modern thinkers hope to avoid. As was often the case in the past with Marxism, however, deconstruction provides a temporary community united to destroy some perceived oppression. It enables both vigorous criticism and a sense of solidarity. These are potent attractions; as Jacques Maritain observes at the very beginning of *Integral Humanism*, one of the great modern hungers is search for a heroic humanism. Deconstruction provides various intellectual occasions for *la lutte continue*. The aim is radical liberation with the return to meaning indefinitely postponed.²⁵

What more often occupies the attention of deconstructors, however, are more palpable political targets. These targets will probably become more and more important in Western cultural debates as a compensation, if the Soviet Union and other Marxist states continue their ideological decline.

VII. The End of History Debate

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama published a now-famous article entitled "The End of History" that tries to describe what the world will be like after

²⁵Liberation, of a sort, there must be, but it comes at quite a high price. The best formulation of this predicament is the novelist Walker Percy's description of *the lost self*:

"With the passing of the cosmological myths and the fading of Christianity as the guarantor of the identity of the self, the self becomes dislocated...is both cut loose and imprisoned by its own freedom, yet imprisoned by a curious and paradoxical bondage like a Chinese handcuff, so that the very attempt to free itself, e.g., by even more refined techniques for the pursuit of happiness, only tighten the bondage and distance the self even farther from the very world it wishes to inhabit as its homeland." (*Lost in the Cosmos* [New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux 1983], 12).

It is important to recognize how deconstruction takes this process to an extreme. In the past people sought release from external constraint in revolution or from internal neurosis in psychology. The deconstructive vision seeks to do both of those things and to free the self from the limitations of being a self. A kind of radical freedom becomes possible, but only at the cost of radical self-annihilation.

the demise of the ideological struggles of the twentieth century. Fukuyama's thesis is that the close of the twentieth century points "not to an 'end of ideology' or a convergence between capitalism and socialism, as earlier predicted, but to an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism."²⁶

Fukuyama argues, further, that this marks not merely "the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the *end of history as such*" (emphasis added). The phrase "the end of history," of course, comes from Hegel, where it means a definitive shift to a final and recognized form of society. As Fukuyama sees it,

...at the end of history it is not necessary that all societies become successful liberal societies, merely that they end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society.

Fukuyama concludes with a somber picture of what the world will be like in which history has ended:

...the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history....Perhaps this very prospect of centuries of boredom will serve to get history started once again.

It is difficult to believe that history, in any sense, is about to end. Even Fukuyama has hinted that his article was meant to be more provocative than prophetic, but the widespread reaction to his argument shows how widespread is the feeling that we are at a new moment in world history. For our present subject, however, it is useful to look at some of the forces Fukuyama thinks might replace the old ideological struggle, all of which

²⁶Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest*, Summer, 1989, 3.

are Hegelian *contradictions* within liberalism: religion, nationalism, ethnicity, feminism, and environmentalism.

The curious fact about each of these forces—with the notable exception of religion—is that they have all been flowering in the shade of Marxism for some years now. Even religion has gotten some reception in radical circles in the form of liberation theology. More to the point, these forces lead to movements that offer themselves as substitute heroic humanisms.

Someone might object that deconstruction does not logically entail political radicalism, and that their linkage is rather a cultural accident. Perhaps; but such movements are closely connected with Barrett's identification of our culture's *sense of being*. There is no logical reason why deconstructive politics should not, say, support the right to life of the fetus against a feminism pushed to the extreme of demanding the slaughter of innocents; but the whole spirit of such politics lines up against the child. It is difficult to imagine a pro-life deconstruction, though it would be a challenge to several of the most potent *centers of authority* in our culture—the universities, the media, radical individualism, and the feminist movement itself.

Though the old Marxist, Fascist, and bourgeois individualist ideologies are discredited, they each have one or more analogues in the new *humanist* movements that stem from the Hegelian contradictions within liberalism. These movements are vague and characteristically know more about what they want to destroy than about what they hope to create. Let us look briefly at some of these issues individually to see what sort of human and humanistic vision each covertly or openly presents.

First, nationalism. Nationalism in its extreme forms is discredited in First World nations. The Fascism of Italy, Spain, Japan, and other countries failed militarily and left a strong intellectual presumption against that kind of nationalist model. Even the rise of nationalism in the Soviet Union has elicited strong fears. In the Third World, however, aggressive nationalism is condoned and even encouraged in various quarters. As unbelievable as the conjunction may seem, Western intellectuals have been known to make excuses for anti-Western regimes like those in Iran, Iraq, and Libya. These pundits really intend a double outcome from encouraging these nationalisms: the creation of alternative models for society and the decentering (to use a deconstructionist term) of global power, especially when that means destruction of power in the West. The old Marxist-Leninist rhetoric about developing countries is largely dead except in places like Cuba, but the virulent mixture of totalitarian control

and a vague anti-Western socialism can persist under cover of an otherwise respectable desire for national self-identity.

A related movement that has already shown strength in this country as well as elsewhere is *ethnicity*. In Africa and the Middle East, but also in Latin America and lately in Eastern Europe, a potentially dangerous combination of nationalism and ethnicity has sprung up. In some instances, the nationalism still has vague Leninist anti-imperial overtones. This leads to a mixing of what Maritain called the totalitarianism of the *social or racial community* with the totalitarianism of the *political state*. In the original French edition of the *Twilight of Civilization*, Maritain observes these two totalitarianisms "*peut-être même un jour arriveront-elles se fondre et se compénétrer, pour le grand malheur des hommes*" ("perhaps even one day they will come to melt into one another, to interpenetrate, to the great sorrow of the human race").²⁷

For us Americans, ethnicity has positive value. All of us can trace our families' arrival to some other, longer-standing culture. Ethnicity is a real component of all of our lives and many of its manifestations are not only benign but positive enrichments of our national heritage. The *ideology* of ethnicity, however, is another story. Some African-Americans, for example, have begun to define their very being by their blackness. Everything else must be calibrated according to that standard. Perhaps, strictly speaking, this should be called *racialism*, but the principle is the same. Human value and the pattern of what constitutes an authentic human life—that is, humanism—are defined according to near tribal standards. These give rise to a kind of *Volksgeist* that could be harmless enough in itself. In many of its forms, however, it is a radical de-centering, fine as a refuge from the neutrality of the common culture, but less than ideal as a balanced vision of humanity. Authentic ethnicity would entail recognition that for the very same reason that one group takes pride in itself, others should be respected in their own ethnic identification.

If nationalism and ethnicity continue in some ways the Fascist impulse under more respectable forms, what of the other Newtonian humanism? Can we find any contemporary analogs to *scientific social-*

²⁷Inexplicably, this sentence does not appear in the English translation. Perhaps the defeat of Nazism eliminated Maritain's most immediate fear.

ism, that is, Communism? After all, perhaps the greatest appeal of Communism to intellectuals was that it provided a rational explanation, a theory by which to understand individual human life and human history.

My candidate to replace scientific socialism may seem odd, but it aspires to be scientific and in most of its manifestations is quirkily socialist: the environmentalist movement.

Now, only a fool or a lunatic could be opposed to wanting to preserve the healthiness and beauty of the world; but it is precisely *a world* and not *an environment* that human beings live in. The very language of the movement is significant. An animal, strictly speaking, inhabits an environment; it responds in easily predictable ways to specific stimuli. Even highly evolved primates show predictable behavior in response to an environment. The spirit behind a certain kind of environmentalism—an ideological environmentalism—seems to want to limit or abolish everything in human behavior it finds *unnatural*; hence its totalitarian temptations. Its typical targets are business, free economic systems, and human population growth.

Environmentalism proper also seeks to mangle the fully human. By what he is, a human being does not exist in a network of stimulus and response. A person acts in a near infinity of ways that no mere stimulus-response theory can explain. Nature is not, for us, a mother, but a kind of older cousin, a fellow creature to be listened to up to a point but left behind in many ways as we engage in quintessentially human acts.

The environmental movement proper seems to have lost sight of this irreducible being of man in the world. It assumes, instead, that human beings can be restricted to some given natural environment that is an ideal.

The point of all this for our reflections on humanism is that lurking behind their environmental concerns, at least in some quarters, are Marxist or neo-Marxist determinisms that hate human freedom and industry. As more overt expressions of this hatred become less feasible, we are likely to see far subtler intellectual and political battles over man and environment.

VIII. Feminism and Deconstruction

The connection between deconstruction and feminism, and their common spirit, has already been noted. In itself, feminism may be a legitimate demand for justice at home and in society; but in deconstruct-

ing certain oppressions associated with *the Phallus*, when an entire society is taxed with blindness for its failure to see the connections between missiles and penis envy, is bullied into rewriting Scripture, and is written off *tout court* because men and women do not show equal performance in all sectors of society, despite natural limits, we are in the presence of a revolutionary impulse run wild rather than a practicable humanism.

The impulses behind nationalism, ethnicity, feminism, or environmentalism are not to be dismissed wholesale. Rather, we should distinguish between the legitimate, limited forms and the radically deconstructive forms of each. In *The Rebel*, Camus put this opposition as one between *revolt* against a specific injustice and *revolution*, entailing a murderous annihilation of everything that stands in the way of what presents itself as a desire for absolute justice.

Each of these movements reflects a basic confusion about the nature of human beings. Any humanism worthy of the name in the contemporary world must be more richly articulated than the humanisms of the past. If there is a common fault of the humanisms of the early part of this century, it is that they focus on too few elements of real human life, usually the individual or the person on the one hand and the state on the other. Maritain's *Integral Humanism*, for example, insufficiently emphasizes various other social factors like family and community, and even physical factors like region and climate. By the time he came to write *Reflections on America*, though, he remarked that he had become aware of the various social and political structures that help America to be both *personnaliste et communautaire*.

In fact, anything less falsifies the picture of true human life considerably. Full human beings have family ties, however tenuous these may be in some cases. Ideological ethnicity seeks to assert the value of those ties. It also, along with nationalisms, seeks to preserve the smaller communities--Edmund Burke's *small platoons*--that also help situate human persons in the world. Humanism must deal with the difficult and crucial question of how the freedom of persons is to be balanced against the common good; but that does not exhaust the question by far: in fact, as every credible school of psychology attests and as recent studies of poverty and welfare have shown, family and community influences are generally more important to authentic development of *a person* than is the state. The state can protect and foster this development in smaller groupings, or it may harm that human matrix in ways that are all too familiar; but the real site of human development and flourishing is in

those more intimate settings. How else could we account for some of the most remarkable human beings of our time—Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Natan Scharansky, Maximilian Kolbe, and others—who grew to greatness in prison camp communities of solidarity in the teeth of some of the most bloodthirsty states in human history?

Furthermore, the old opposition of types of states, as Fukuyama says, is probably over. Democracies based on constitutions guaranteeing the dignity of human persons, an incipient natural law grounding, are likely to appear in many places in the near future. Hungary has gone peacefully from the Marxist to the democratic camp, for example. Poland has undergone unprecedented changes, and East Germany and West Germany are coming to terms on reunification. The news from the homeland of international socialism, the Soviet Union, is hard to believe from day to day. Chinese Marxism seems to be destined to face domestic opposition. Of course, a shakeup of the Soviet Union, or an economic downturn in the West, could arrest or slow this process, but the intellectual and historical conclusions to be drawn about Marxist systems are now clear. We should be on our guard, therefore, that we not accept Marxism incrementally under the banner of one or more kindred movements when the human race has rejected it as a totality.

IX. Toward A Reconstruction

Let us return to deconstructive theory, however, to see how we may reconstruct a more fully human intellectual and political order in our current circumstances. Some deconstructionists admit the need of deconstructing deconstruction lest it, too, become merely another oppressive Center of meaning. Centers there will be, regardless of the desire to do without them, simply because the dynamic character of human life demands more than the dispersion of energies. George Santayana put this well over fifty years ago in *The Genteel Tradition at Bay*:

A universal culture always tolerant, always fluid, smiling on every thing exotic and on everything new, sins against the principle of life itself. We exist by distinction, by integration round a specific nucleus according to a particular pattern.

The appeal of deconstructive revolution is precisely its momentary integration of forces against some particular targets. The question for those of us who are not deconstructors is whether there is not some

wider, more substantial center of meaning to give this vigor to life.

A rather traditional deconstructing of deconstruction might begin with a different approach to the idea of language. Far from being a free play of signs, language situates us in several overlapping communities. The French critic Roland Barthes had an intuition of this, which he expressed by saying that all language is "quite simply Fascist"; but perhaps there are less sinister ways to conceptualize this fact.

As we now know, an isolated Cartesianego does not exist. No subject of which we can conceive could have the linguistic and conceptual skills to assert *Cogito ergo sum* without already belonging to a family and language community of a particular sort. Similarly, the deconstructive free play of signs can be understood to depend upon a community of a certain sort for its beginnings--paradoxically the free communities of the West.

Language theory is the basis of this whole movement, and in some ways deconstruction does us a service in showing that language is not merely a mechanical *adaequatio* of a string of words to an object. Deconstruction's profound insight is that in purely mechanical terms there exists a gap between word and object. A word is a thing, a sign if you will, but also a thing; and the link, if it exists, between word and object is mysterious. Early in this century, the French linguist Ferdinand Saussure proposed a scientific correspondence theory that repeated several *adaequatio* arguments, but both Saussure and his followers found the very gap deconstructionists emphasize hard to explain. The word and all language, in a sense, posit an *absence* of the object, and a whole system of absences may be made to arise from that intuition. Derrida even speaks of a metaphysics of absence.

Any adequate reply to deconstruction must confront this language problem. There are resources in realist thinking that might help here, particularly a renewed and expanded theory of intentionality that would underscore the difficulties of all sorts to which the free play of signs immediately gives rise; but even more importantly, an elaboration of a theory of knowledge as the "immaterial union of the knower with the known"²⁸ could dispel several dangerous errors. That union will scan-

²⁸See, for example, Marc F. Griesbach's enlightening remarks in his "Presidential Address: Restoring Philosophical Realism in Today's Intellectual World," 1983 *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*.

dalize any number of schools of contemporary philosophy, but it is the kind of mystery that clarifies and vivifies as opposed to the mystifications of a movement like deconstruction that lead to more and more obscure dead ends.²⁹

Furthermore, as the American critic M. H. Abrams has pointed out, a deconstructive reading of a text is not so radically agnostic as Derrida would have us believe: "Deconstruction can only subvert the meanings of a text that has always already been construed." The old-style, *metaphysical* reading Abrams designates as reading1 and the deconstructive reading, added to the first reading, he calls reading2. In Derrida, as Abrams well recognizes, reading1 is *always already* an interpretation; but it is precisely the general agreement about this reading1, however pluralistic our approach to the text may be, that Abrams finds casts doubt on the deconstructive opening. How is it that we can identify what most people presume to have been Rousseau's intention, for example, and can communicate to one another with a fair degree of completeness and certainty, that reading of the text, whatever doubts we may later introduce?

To take a notorious example, in *Of Grammatology* Derrida examines Rousseau's use of the term "nature" in the "Essay on the Origin of Language." Derrida has little trouble in showing that Rousseau's "nature" is an incoherent concept that is always providing occasion for supplementarity when pure "nature" becomes inadequate to the tasks to which Rousseau wishes to put it. Abrams observes:

Derrida designates his reading1—the determinate construal of the *legibility* of passages of Rousseau—as no more than a strategic phase, which though indispensable, remains *provisional* to a further *critical* or deconstructive reading. One of Derrida's moves in this critical reading is to identify strata, or *strands* in Rousseau's text which, when read determinately, turn out to be mutually contradictory. A number of earlier commentators, of course, have found

²⁹George Steiner has observed: "The chain of signs is infinite. It is one's perception of the nature and status of that infinity, either transcendent or, in the severest yet also most playful sense, meaningless, which will determine one's exercise of understanding and of judgment" (Steiner, *Real Presences*, 59).

Rousseau's linguistic and social theories to be incoherent or contradictory, but have regarded this feature as a logical fault or as assimilable to an overall direction of his thinking. Derrida, however, regards such self-contradictions not as logical mistakes which Rousseau could have avoided, but as inescapable features not only in Rousseau's texts but in all Western texts, since all rely on fixed logocentric ground yet are purely conventional and differential in their economy.³⁰

We might push this insight still further. Derrida seeks to prevent deconstruction from being reabsorbed by a scientific system by positing an uncanny absence standing outside of the Western metaphysical discourse, a *no-thing* irreducible to the language of presence. Yet as in all such attempt at heterology, the mere notice of the wholly Other in language gives language some way to appropriate what appears to be its own outside. In the *metaphysical age*, for example, apophatic theologies arose to describe the contours of what God was not. Some of the Kabbalists, too, posited a pure Truth that could not be sullied by the impure approaches of human thought. These examples make the characterization of the metaphysical age as an age of presence and certitude historically doubtful (both Heidegger and Derrida may simply have erred in this respect).

Derrida is in part aware of these earlier strategies and tries to go beyond even them; but it is not at all clear that the mere negation of that negative theology protects deconstruction from becoming yet another metaphysic. Even without falling into a new version of the Hegelian dialectic, such a vision inevitably begins to make what was outside of language part of the inside. How else can we account for the fact that we understand what Derrida has written in the several books that appeared around 1968 and that made seminal contributions to our understanding of the *post-structuralist* situation? We may not consider the inevitable capture of his sense by language a fault, as he might, but neither are we entirely convinced that deconstruction has found a way past "metaphysical" language.

There is also a *historical* problem with Derrida. We may agree with

³⁰M.H. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays on Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 148.

Nietzsche and Derrida that the *past* is always already a set of interpretations, yet that realization does not free us from certain limits on historical assertions. Derrida has often claimed that his work does not intend to subvert the objective work of the *sciences* within their own sphere. He intends only to operate on the margins of the text, upon the things taken for granted. It is difficult to see, however, how deconstructive *sollicitation* does not upset the meaning of all signs. What archi-principle, itself resistant to deconstructive readings, would limit such *sollicitation*? To take a concrete example, Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and several of his writings on history are brilliant interpretations worthy of careful reading by every generation of scholars interested in the issues he addresses; but we know with as much certainty as human beings can know that Nietzsche's account of the evolution of tragedy in ancient Greece is founded on demonstrably false historical premises—in the sense of simple sequences of events. Do the ascertainable facts limit the correctness of the reading? Of course, they do, as Derrida admits; but what then of the belief that all texts are already interpretations? Some interpretations must retain at least limited authority and an *a priori* trust that makes them something more than *mere* interpretation for us to be able to carry out critical historical analyses.³¹

What can be written can take on enough determinate sense that we may argue to a large extent about its meaning. The meaning of "closure" in *Of Grammatology* is clear enough that we can judge its truth value compared with that of the *end of history* in Hegel. In the final analysis, *closure* and *end* suggest systems of thought, even if those systems have very different characteristics. The metaphysical epoch, and Hegel as part of it, seem to have a gravitational pull that Derrida's centrifugal forces, for all their brilliance, cannot fully overcome.

Furthermore, we should emphasize the historical role of traditional

³¹Perhaps it was the realization of the difficulties of consistency in writing the deconstructive essay that led Derrida, after the burst of creativity around 1968, to bring out works more avowedly creative than analytic. *The Postcard, Glas*, and other texts over the last decade or so seem to try to embody the belief that the free play of signs, outside of determinate analytical meanings, is the only proper way of *writing*, once we have discovered the true nature of the sign.

humanistic beliefs in restraining totalitarian oppression. Deconstruction is right to apply to Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger the test of "by their fruits you shall know them." Yet we should look at other forms of humanism, too, in this light.

The different ways that Jews were treated in Germany and Italy after the state had in each case passed official anti-Semitic decrees is here instructive. Most German Jews were rounded up and died; most Italian Jews were hidden by families and individuals of no greater ethical stature than their German counterparts. The Italians, however, simply would not do certain things even if the state insisted. Do we really want to deconstruct these human decencies?

You may argue that these families and communities should be deconstructed because their centers of meaning are in various ways oppressive; but viewed in another light, they are precisely the kinds of forces that, at times, best resist the economic and political pretensions of progressive systems.³² There are political dangers lurking within deconstruction. M. H. Abrams asks:

Which of the following alternatives is more apt to open a cultural vacuum that will be filled by power-hungry authoritarians who have no doubts about what they want nor scruples about how to get it: A systematic and sustained enterprise to deconstruct the grounds of all truths or values asserted by our culture-bearing texts, and to subvert even our confidence that we can communicate determinately with one another? Or a reformulated version of the central

³²One of my differences of emphasis with Michael Novak's latest book, *Free Persons and the Common Good* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1989) is that, in trying to defend a society of free persons against a tribal view of a unitary common good, his language occasionally is too sweeping. He writes, for example, of premodern attachments to family and clan: "naturally the human race experiences a profound nostalgia for such tribal solidarities. Adolf Hitler traded upon these solidarities, as have all modern collectivists" (84). True enough, but something akin to a good form of tribal solidarity also inhibited the execution of Jews under Italian Fascism. Novak knows the importance of these small platoons as well as anyone, but his language does not always reflect it.

Romantic hope that, by a revolution of mind and heart, man may yet achieve unity with himself, community with his fellow men, and reconciliation with a nature in which, because it can be humanized, he can feel at home?³³

Realizations such as these open up the way to talk about the importance of the habits we call virtues. In deconstructive views, stable behaviors reflect petrifications of a free flow; but there are certain forms of stability, encouraged primarily in family and community settings, that have inestimable value both in the personal and in the largest spheres of human life.

A perceptive French response to deconstruction has come from two thinkers seeking to take into account both Derrida's concerns and the impasse to which his speculations lead. In *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*,³⁴ Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut pit themselves against all the major names in French poststructuralism. The common error of these theorists, say Ferry and Renaut, was to identify humanism with metaphysics. Conceding the dangers posed by what they regard as all such complete explanations of human natures, Ferry and Renaut argue the need for the creation of a *non-metaphysical humanism*. This last would defend human rights and might even seek to justify "*liberté, égalité, et fraternité*," though obviously on different philosophical grounds than did the thinkers of the Enlightenment.

In the current climate of thought, even this modest form of humanism is a welcome development; but we might ask Ferry and Renaut just what a non-metaphysical humanism could be if it has a definite content? If human rights, however defined, are to be considered as in some fashion a reflection of human nature, this nature must have some, at least partly identifiable, form, leaving the door open to metaphysics again. To be clear about this, if there is some specifiable human nature, "a dignity proper to man," in Heidegger's words, we may choose not to use theistic or classically metaphysical terms to define it; but that some irreducible,

³³M.H. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 268.

³⁴Trans. Mary Schnackenberg Cattani (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

metaphysically modest, yet metaphysically anchored human nature is being posited is inescapable; and once we resort to this hypothesis, we might as well give up the pretence of avoiding metaphysics and face the problem squarely: what is the best and most accurate metaphysical description of human nature and humanism?

Ultimately, we arrive at the old issues of humanism: what form will the state take? Fascism, Communism, and bourgeois individualism have long been discredited intellectually, and history has shown the intellectual analyses were correct. If Fukuyama is correct, liberal democratic regimes will be our future, and the primary political questions of the future will be to enhance liberty within democratic order. Deconstructive critiques, however, go beyond mere correction of errors to call in question the very legitimacy of all ordered structure. This is the nub of the question that must be faced by any serious reflection on humanism today: Can we justify *any* regime?

This already long essay is perhaps the preamble to a longer analysis, and we can only point out here the direction an answer to this question might take. As G. K. Chesterton once remarked about America:

The melting pot must not melt. The original shape can be traced on the lines of Jeffersonian democracy; and it will remain in that shape until it becomes shapeless. America invites all men to become citizens; but it implies the dogma that there is such a thing as citizenship.

In democracies like ours, where citizens are expected to take charge of their own government, not many of us will be seduced by the deconstructive movement. Quite a few of us, especially during our university years, might be harassed by various forms of deconstruction that would seek to deny the dogma of free citizenship or destabilize the defense of free institutions that check and limit one another. In some ways, an unchecked deconstruction is just as dangerous as an unchecked *duce*. Each ultimately demolishes the order that preserves liberty. We absolutely require dogmas such as the citizenship of free persons whose very resistance to all attempts to deconstruct them keep us free from the false freedoms that in their own way finally enslave.