

DERRIDA'S CRITIQUE OF METAPHYSICS OF PRESENCE

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ABSTRACT

Derrida underlines that Metaphysics of presence is impossible of formulation. The logocentric conception of language and the metaphysics of presence reflect the irrepressible human desire for some transcendental signified. Philosophers have this deeply entrenched urge to ground language to something that is language independent or transcendental to language. Thus, the conventionally soaked mindset assumes meaning stemming from words by their standing for entities such as images or senses etc. directly present to the consciousness. We are centered on speech as it gives us the feeling of being in direct appropriation and communion with meanings – for it is here and now while talking that we are directly in touch with words and figures of speech in all their pictorial transparency and resplendence delivering their meanings to the sanctum sanctorum of our consciousness in all their absolute purity, innocence and untouchability.

Key Words: Derrida, Language, Metaphysics, Meaning

INTRODUCTION

According to Derrida., common people, literary critics, intellectuals, scholars and especially professional philosophers have this unquenchable thirst to find a trans linguistic anchor to legitimate what they talk, think and write etc. The logocentric conception of language and the 'metaphysics of presence' reflect the irrepressible human desire for some 'transcendental signified (Cooper, P. 531). Philosophers have this deeply entrenched urge to ground language to something that is language-independent or transcendental to language itself. The logocentric conception of language, according to Derrida, views signs as signifying mental experiences, which mental experiences themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance (Cooper, P. 532). Thus, the conventionally soaked mindset assumes meaning stemming from words by their standing for entities such as images or senses etc, directly present to the consciousness. This ostensible epistemological structure of concealed expectations embosms a grandiloquent and smashing piece of metaphysics Derrida christens' as 'Metaphysics of Presence'. Derrida

finds Husserl's phenomenological programme to be deeply and subterraneously anchored to 'Metaphysics of presence' and attacks him with his full deconstructive force.

Our pathological phonocentric orientation silently and subtly orientates us towards logocentric conception of language and consequently attunes us irretrievably and irresistibly to the 'Metaphysics of Presence'. We are centred on speech as it gives us the feeling of being in direct appropriation and communion with 'meanings - for, it is here and now. while talking, that we are directly in touch with words and figures of speech in all their pictorial transparency and resplendence delivering their meanings to the sanctum sanctorum of our consciousness in all their absolute purity, innocence and untouchability. Our pathological phonocentricity is especially reflected when as professional academicians or philosophers we are engaged in almost interminable monologues or perennial soliloquies. While listening to our monologous and soliloquous ruminations or speeches, we are thrilled to bits, so to say, by the absolute proximity of our voices and corresponding meanings (Cooper, P. 532). At this point, in the deepest silence and solitude, the nonlinguistic object through its image is in perfect and absolute congruence with consciousness and the meanings of respective words at respective nanoseconds are delivered to us without any hitch or in perfect harmony (Bass, pp. 242-43).

At this point, it does not occur to us that words and meaning are arbitrarily and stipulatively juxtaposed or connected through a complex process of a long drawn out evaluation of language, culture, epistemology and ontology. The monologous ruminations and soliloquies rantings exuding out complete, absolute and congruent co-presence of words and meanings, do not allow us to ponder over the fact that words acquire their meaning through their deployment and use in multiple contexts of life, culture and civilization. The crucial role 'played by the interrelations of stipulated meanings of different words in the sustenance of the entire semantic network of a given language is also lost sight of by the ultimately victorious 'metaphysician of the presence.

The postmodernists such as Derrida try to overcome modernist or general philosophical discourse of Europe by revealing inconsistencies or aporias in its conceptualizations, interpretations, formulations and articulations. The aporias generally characterize the ontotheological thought - pattern about being and truth finally culminating or grounding itself in a conception of divinity. The ontotheological metaphysics is the metaphysics of presence. The very being is counted in terms of presence. We conceive ourselves to be absolutely present to the absolute divinity which is itself conceived as presence to itself. Such a divinity is conceived as the Being in which being and knowing coincide, the Being that is not only self-conscious but omniscient as well as cognizant of being *the raison de 'tre*

and *locus standi* of all that is or the rationale or justification of all existence. Such a Divinity becomes the criterion of truth. Deconstruction as the method of revelation here divulges or discloses the aporia that such a modernist criterion of truth can itself not be sustained in view of the implications of the very criterion (Charlesworth, P.166).

The reference of language to 'presence', an assumption that has served as the bedrock of classical discourse is flatly denied by Derrida as well. According to Derrida, the illusion of presence for language to refer to is actuated by the traditional realist assumption about language. For example, I have this misconception that here and now at this micro-instant of time I am experiencing something. This experience is defined or deemed by me as my present. However, the illusion of presence is generated by a realist account of language wherein a single reality is referred to by a single meaning of an expression or description. It is the realist semanticists who have been postulating a fixed meaning for a fixed reality (Gare, P.59) and it is this postulation of fixed meanings that is responsible for the assumption of 'presence'. The denial of the assumption of a single fixed meaning by Derrida correspondingly snuffs out the assumption of a single describable reality as well (Gare, P.167).

It is most wishful of human thinking to assume 'meaning' to be directly present to consciousness. Meaning cannot be deemed to be an image or concept of direct acquaintance and presence of operations of our mind. If we are to grasp the meaning of any given word, phrase or expression; we cannot do so in the splendid isolation of an intellectual ivory-tower monitoring the conceptual and imaginative operations of our minds. In any attempt to grasp the meaning of any given word or phrase or expression, we are unavoidably driven to a multicomplex and never-ending system of references and meanings as well as to an infinity of historical, contemporary and futuristic contexts of use and employment of the words, phrases and expressions under consideration. All these complex networks of references and meanings and countless temporal contexts of use of words cannot be deemed to be present to human consciousness. Human language is too complex an interplay of differences, contrasts, comparisons and deferrals and so inextricably interwoven into an ongoing and perennial hermeneutic circle to admit of any simplistic word for word exercise with a view to divulging or disclosing the meaning of a particular phrase or expression.

In our attempt to rebut Derrida, it will not be of much help to invoke the role of intention in fixing the meaning of words. Meaning cannot emanate out of our intention fixing a word with an image. This so-called 'intentional fixation of meaning' to buck up "metaphysics of presence" cannot be accomplished on two counts: firstly, the so-called image is, in its turn, itself a signifier and therefore itself in need of interpretation, and, secondly; human intention cannot be either supposed or deemed

to be playing any crucial role in determining the place of a word, phrase or expression in the vast economy of semantic differences and deferrals or determining their indefinite uses in a never-ending series or circle of contexts or backgrounds.

The Derridian anti-foundationalism rides roughshod and refuses to admit of any foundationalist riders. For example, if we ask that even if human intention cannot be deemed to be playing a meaning-fixing role, cannot the real and so-called external world of epistemologists serve as a foundation on which to establish the edifice of the 'metaphysics of presence'. Derrida would accept none of it. For the so-called external world, we are living in is not open to us without linguistic as well as cultural and historical mediation. We are not neutral, detached, disinterested and objective spectators and observers of the world. We are deeply 'educated', 'civilised', 'doctored', 'taught', 'cultured' and 'sophisticated' persons looking at the world through the complex network of linguistic 'differences' and 'deferrals'. The claim that there is nothing outside of the text is a striking way of saying that the world we experience comes to us through unavoidable linguistic negotiations or textual transactions. The external world in relation to man cannot be impervious to linguistic, interpretative and hermeneutical mediations.

There is no 'real' world, no 'objective' world and no 'essential' world. The world we live in and experience or encounter is a world interpreted through endless linguistic 'differences' and 'deferrals'. We just cannot have a language-independent or text-independent world. The world is unavoidably and inevitably available as a multicomplex network of distinctions, demarcations, comparisons, contrasts, differentiations etc. and all these operations are linguistically tailored or designed and carried out. Just as for Sartre, we are condemned to be free, so for Derrida we are condemned to linguisticity and hermeneuticity or lingocentricity. Language is the be-all and end-all of our philosophical explorations, metaphysical interpretations, epistemological investigations and even axiological standardizations. We just cannot jump out of our linguistic and interpretative skin and by implication transcend the horizons dictated by our culture and history.

CONCLUSION

In view of the fact that meaning for words can neither be fixed by the intention of the authors nor by the so-called external world, Derrida underlines, that the quest for 'Metaphysics of presence' is impossible of any ground or foundation. At this point it does not occur to us that words and meanings are arbitrarily and stipulatively juxtaposed or connected through a complex process of a long drawn out evolution of language, culture, epistemology and ontology. The monologous ruminations and

soliloquous rantings oozing out complete, absolute and congruent co-presence of words and meanings do not allow us to ponder over the fact that words acquire their meaning through their deployment and use in multiple contexts of life, culture and civilization. The crucial role played by the interrelations of stipulated meanings of different words in the sustenance of the entire semantic network of a given language is also lost sight of by the ultimately victorious metaphysician of the presence.

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