

Play - 4: Jacques Derrida

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To risk meaning nothing is to start to play.

- Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida strips away the grounding to which Gadamer seems inextricably bound and sets play free in the joyous Nietzschean affirmation of the play of the world, a world without truth, without origin. Derrida does not see play so differently from Schiller and Gadamer, but he thinks of play in a radical way, consequently presenting a more mature understanding of play. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that play allows Derrida the language for the radical messages of postmodernity. We could say that Derrida takes play most seriously.

Derrida often uses the word "play" (*jeu*), though he rarely directly discusses play as a concept. In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"¹ he explicitly discusses play. Derrida's subject is the challenge to the fixedness of structure that he understands to characterize our epoch, a challenge he sees exemplified by Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics, Freud's critique of self-presence, and Heidegger's destruction of the determination of being as presence. The rupture in the way of thinking about structure was a shift from the structure to the principles that govern the structure, that is, a shift to what he terms "structurality." According to Derrida, structure has always been

neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was . . . to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the freeplay (*jeu*) of the structure.²

A structurality characterized by the fixation of a center or an origin is given a foundation, a certitude, beyond the play of the structure. The center or origin which is of the structure is also outside of the structure. While the center permits the play of the structure it also closes off this play.

Play, for Derrida, is a "disruption of presence," "an interplay of absence and presence," conceived even before the alternative of presence and absence.³ This disruption is coincident with the realization of the concept of the centered structure. This is a movement from structure to structurality, that is, from thinking about form to thinking about principles, such as designating a center, that govern the character of a structure. This shift in thinking leads to the realization that structures are of the process of signification and that the center of a structure is a surrogate for some central presence. But this presence is always transported outside itself into its structural surrogate. From here, Derrida argues,

¹Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," in *The Languages of Criticism and the Science of Man*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugene Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), pp. 247-265.

²Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," p. 247-8.

³Similar to Jean Baudrillard's discussion of seduction as an oscillation of presence and absence in *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990)

it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the center has no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into being.⁴

The concept of play casts the light in which Derrida is able to illuminate the vitality of such structures as language or any code system. The field of language is that of play, by which he means "a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble."⁵ It is not that the field of language is inexhaustible that it permits infinite substitutions, but because it is missing

a center which arrests and founds the freeplay of substitutions. ... This movement of the freeplay, permitted by the lack, the absence of a center or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the center, the sign which *supplements* it, which takes its place in its absence—because this sign adds itself, occurs in addition, over and above, comes as a supplement.⁶

Play then is a decentering movement; the movement of an infinite number of sign substitutions; the movement of the difference that must precede even the distinction of presence and absence.

These characteristics of structurality that are designated by the term play are also evident in Derrida's discussion of "différance" (the "a" being an intentional anomalous spelling of "difference" with a silent effect). Of the French Derrida notes that "the verb 'to differ' [*différer*] seems to differ from itself."⁷ On the one hand, it is differ, the "difference as distinction, inequality, discernibility." On the other hand, as defer, it "expresses interposition of delay, the interval of a spacing and temporalizing that puts off until 'later' what is presently denied." "Différance," neither a word nor concept, is used by Derrida to identify the commonness, the relatedness, of the two movements of differing to one another. "Différance" is "the sameness which is not identical" or "the play of differences." Importantly, characteristic of the rupture with structure that characterizes our epoch, *différance* "is not, does not exist, and is not any sort of being-present (*on*). And . . . has neither existence nor essence. It belongs to no category of being, present or absent."⁸ "Différance" designates the movement by which language or any code becomes constituted as a fabric of differences. It is this movement that Derrida commonly calls play (*jeu*).

By its anomalous spelling, "différance" as a signifier, has a sense suspended between two verbs "to differ" and "to defer." With the signifier "différance," Derrida designates the shading of one sense into the other in signification where meaning is always deferred by an endless supplementarity, yet meaning also depends on distinctive oppositions (differences). As Christopher Norris says,

⁴Ibid., p. 249.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Derrida, "Différance" in *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 129.

⁸Ibid., p. 134.

"*Différance* not only designates this theme [of the supplementarity of difference and sameness] but offers in its own unstable meaning a graphic example of the process at work."⁹

Play designates the vitality, the movement that arises in differences. Play is movement in that sense described by Gadamer as the to-and-fro of constantly repeated movement, as back and forth movement where neither pole of the movement represents the goal, an unstable movement among poles that cannot co-exist.

The loss of center, the embracing of the play of *différance*, of supplementarity, need not be met with nostalgia for presence or origins. Nor is there any intent by Derrida to discover some alternative logic of play. He lucidly articulates the alternatives in the context of interpretation:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.¹⁰

Though it might appear that Derrida opts for the second interpretation of interpretation, he says that there is no question of choosing between them.¹¹ Such a choice would be trivial, for we must "first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différence* of this irreducible difference."¹² In other words, we must engage the play between these two irreconcilable interpretations of interpretation. In this play between play and not play, Derrida invokes radical imagery to capture some sense of it: "the species of the non-species, in the forlorn, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity."¹³

Derrida, brings to fuller maturity the way that "play" has been understood by Schiller and Gadamer. In positing the play impulse Schiller sought to show the impossibility of choosing between the formal impulse and the sensual impulse, to illuminate the vitality of the interplay between these irreconcilable impulses. Schiller would surely have readily appreciated Derrida's discussion of "différance" and supplementarity. Whereas Gadamer attempted to move toward being in self-presentation, Derrida, by taking play radically, moves wholly away from the ontological language which tends to take the play out of play.

⁹Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

¹⁰Derrida, p. 265.

¹¹Derrida's discussion of interpretation parallels Jonathan Z. Smith's discussion of "locative" and "utopian" mapping strategies.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹³*Ibid.*

Whereas Schiller and Gadamer see play as fundamental to understand what distinguishes art, Derrida rather pushes the play of play, structurality beyond structurality to the unthinkable describable only in terms of the monstrous.