

Understanding of Derrida's *Structure, Sign and Play in The Discourse of Human Sciences*

Jacques Derrida, A French philosopher, critically engages with structuralism. He comments on what the structure is and engages with the politics of the structure itself, what he terms as the "structurality of structure". This essay showcases the extent of limits of structuralism, which provides the structures but fails to examine the concept of structure itself.

Derrida explains that the concept of structure is as old as the concept of episteme, but has never been discussed. On explaining the structure he first defines what a center is- "an organizing principle that allows for limited play", i.e. center gives structure its structurality, "orients, balances and organizes the structure", but at the same time, inhibits play and allows a limited discourse to take play within the structure itself, for with the center comes boundaries. Another characteristic of center is that it is the part of the yet at the same time it is unaffected by the changes taking place in it. Therefore the center that leads coherence and structurality to a structure, it at the same time escapes it. Therefore, the paradoxical concept of center being both inside and outside the structure, i.e. the center that governs the center escapes its totality at the same time. For example: God is the center of human life and dictates laws, yet at the same time he is not the part of this life. He is absent from the play of human life. Derrida then chooses to call the center as "a transcendental signifier." Lastly, he presents the very essence of the center that by limiting play, it is mastering anxiety that free play leads to.

Examining the history of structures Derrida elaborates that one center gets replaced by another. Thus the factors governing the play too get epistemologically shifted. For example, the center of human society shifted from God to Renaissance man. Thus, at given point the center of the structure cannot be substituted by various permutations but historically the center can get replaced.

Defining the event that leads to disruption of the structure- the concept of "rupture" is discussed. This comes about at a point when structurality of structure is examined. And with this examination the structure gets destroyed.

Thereby comes a state when there is no center, conclusively no locus. At this moment, with removal of center, infinite play takes place. Each sign defines itself with respect to other signs, showing that there is no center, and in this case even "transcendental signifier" needs to be defined with respect to other signs. So there is no structure and all is then a discourse.

An important question answered by the deconstructionist is that “where and how does this decentering, this thinking of structurality of structure, occur?” To this the answer comes as follows: there is no particular event or doctrine that caused it. But discusses “three names” in particular:

- (a) Nietzschean critique of metaphysics and especially that of Being and Truth.
- (b) Freudian critique of self-presence.
- (c) Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics, of ontology, of the determination of Being as presence.

As and when these theories rupture the pre-existing center they also enter into a unique circle that relates the “history of metaphysics and the history of destruction of metaphysics.” A pertinent point here to be noted is that nowhere is Derrida favoring the doing away of structures. In fact, what he is suggesting is that necessity to keep a structure for discourse to take place. The focus is on an alternate play, of not conforming to the entire concept of sign itself.

He explains this with relation to the Saussure’s concept of sign (linguistics), where a sign is composed of signifier and signified. Signifier is the physical form of sign and signified is the verbal/word used to define the signifier. On the onset the idea of not doing away with the sign is maintained. He talks about the reduction of the binary between the signifier and the signified. The two ways of doing this is:

- A. First is the traditional way of submitting to the traditional way of submitting to the arbitrary relation between signified and signifier.
- B. Second is to completely be done away with this arbitrary relation between the signifier and signified

There is where the crux of the essay lies. Derrida wishes to focus on a new mode of thinking, not limiting within the old one. This is where Freud, Heidegger and Nietzsche fall short. For at the very moment they focus on destroying the structure, they the entering into the discourse of the structure itself. He substantiates this concept by using the example of ethnography, where he says that the science of ethnography disrupts the idea of Europe as the center but the moment he renounces it, he is entering into a discourse within the premise of ethnocentricity.

Derrida goes on to deconstruct Levi-Strauss’s idea of binaries. Strauss devises two categories: nature and culture. Where anything that is spontaneous is Nature and anything that is acquired is Culture. This opposition is dissolved through by something called the “scandal”. To explain this, the idea of incest prohibition is used. Incest prohibition is a

universal, and every culture has it that it seems a natural act, but at the same time each culture governs this in their own way, thereby making the idea specific. (For example: the legalization of marriage between cousins amongst the Muslims is acceptable but not amongst the Hindus) In a contradiction like this where can the “scandal” be placed? In both? So here, the idea of binaries is refuted.

The main point of focus here is that Derrida, in the first place, is not withering away the structures but finding flaws in it. The structure has to be kept to be in order to critique it. What structuralism does is to attribute a truth value to a structure; this is what is shaken, by the theory of deconstruction. Then you can discard the structure or use it to find its play.

He calls this method as “bricolage” and the person doing that is a “bricoleur.” Borrowing the terminology from the Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* “bricoleur” is a person who uses the mean at his disposal in any desired permutations and combinations as he wishes to reach the end goal. Strauss places the binary opposition of a bricoleur to that of an engineer. An engineer is someone who builds structures that are coherent, stable, have a fixed center and an absolute truth value. The play of deconstruction of binaries by Derrida here is observable.

He explains since every discourse that borrows its ideas from the cites, coherent or not, is a bricoleur and an engineer too creates structure and discourse, limited or not, from within itself. The opposition gets diluted and engineer then is a myth created by bricoleur.

Finally Derrida observes, that there are two way to interpret structure, sign and play: one aims to decipher an absolute truth and avoid play and the other affirms play. The first way was dominant throughout human history and the second is only emerging now. Play must supersede the alternatives of presence and absence and hence there is no need to be concerned with the absence of the center or of origin. Play is possible if we can forego our need for truth. It is possible then, to have a philosophy without concepts, without orientation and without coherence.