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DECONSTRUCTION THEORY: WHO WAS JACQUES DERRIDA?

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ABSTRACT

Jacques Derrida born Jackie Élie Derrida was a French philosopher. He developed the philosophy of deconstruction which he utilized in a number of his texts, and which was developed through close readings of the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. He is one of the major figures associated with post-structuralism.

During his career, Derrida published over 40 books, together with hundreds of essays and public presentations. He has had a significant influence on the humanities and social sciences, including philosophy, literature, law, anthropology, historiography, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychoanalysis, music, architecture, and political theory.

KEYWORDS

Gulliver's Travels, École Normale Supérieure, Gide, Nietzsche, Harvard, "Origin of Geometry," academic life.

INTRODUCTION

Jackie Derrida, later known as Jacques, was born on July 15, 1930, in El Biar, Algeria, near Algiers. Both his parents came from old Algerian Jewish families. His mother was Georgette Safar, whose family had lived in Algeria for at least three generations. In 1923 she

married Aimé Derrida, a young traveling salesman. Their first son, René, was born in 1925. Paul Derrida followed in 1929 and died a little less than three months later.



Then came Jackie in 1930. Jackie's younger sister, Janine, was born in 1934. A third brother, Norbert, was born in 1938 and died, like Paul, several months later. Derrida later said that the fact he was a middle child explained everything about him. He often quarreled with his elder brother, but never with his adored younger sister.

The Derridas' house was in the rue Saint-Augustin in El Biar, a fact that later attracted the attention of their son, the most famous North African thinker (along with Albert Camus) since Augustine. I

Jackie Derrida left Algeria as a nineteen-year-old in 1949, years before the war of independence of Algiers. Growing up amidst significant social unrest, Derrida immersed himself in literature, finding solace and inspiration in works such as Gulliver's Travels, Rousseau's Reveries, Chateaubriand's René, and Gide's novels. His unusual hobby of raising silkworms, with their vibrant red cocoons and emerging moths, provided a stark contrast to the turmoil of his surroundings.

In an interview, Derrida remembered how he first "got into" literature and philosophy.

"Very early I read Gide, Nietzsche, Valéry, in ninth or tenth grade." He especially loved Gide's *Les nourritures terrestres* (Earthly Nourishment): "I would have learned this book by heart if I could have. No doubt, like every adolescent, I admired its fervor, the

lyricism of its declarations of war on religion and families. For me it was a manifesto or Bible: at once religious and neo-Nietzschean, sensualist, immoralist, and especially very Algerian"

Derrida's intellectual pursuits contrasted sharply with his family's history of small business ownership. His parents were not particularly literary, and his father, Aimé, like his grandfather before him, worked for generations as a salesman for the Tachet family's wine and spirits business. Despite extensive travel for work under a demanding boss, Aimé always returned home to his family each night.

Jackie's parents had no idea what the École Normale Supérieure was. But their teenage son, the brilliantly curious bookworm, already had his sights set on this immensely prestigious inner sanctum of French intellectual life. In the course of the twentieth century, the École produced Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault, along with other distinguished French intellectuals. Jackie was to become one of this impressive company.

Derrida prepared for the intensely competitive École Normale Supérieure entrance exam through rigorous study, first at the Lycée Gauthier in Algiers and then at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris. Admission was exceptionally selective, with only a handful of students accepted each year from a vast applicant pool. In 1956



Derrida made his first trip, by boat, to the United States. He was to study at Harvard for a year under a rather thin pretext, as he himself admitted: that he needed to consult microfilms of Edmund Husserl's manuscripts in the Harvard library. A year later, in June 1957, he returned to France on the same ship that brought him to America, La Liberté (Counterpath 25). While at Harvard, Derrida worked on his translation of and introduction to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry," which was to appear as a book six years later.

Derrida was impressed by the openness and seriousness of American academic life, as he first experienced it in Cambridge. At cocktail parties, people expressed real curiosity about his research; genuine intellectual exchanges appeared more possible than in France. His later popularity in the United States seemed to be presaged, even before any of the books that were to earn him such fame in the American academy. The major event of Derrida's year in America was undoubtedly his wedding to Marguerite Aucouturier, which took place in Boston in June 1957. The marriage would last for nearly fifty years, until Jacques Derrida's death. The couple had two sons, Pierre and Jean; a third son, Daniel, was born out of wedlock to Derrida by Sylviane Agaçinski, a philosopher who later became the wife of French prime minister Lionel Jospin. (In the final interview before his death, Derrida expressed his disdain for marital fidelity. Still stirring up trouble in his last days,

he complained that monogamy was "imposed upon Jews by Europeans," and that it is "neither Jewish nor, as is well known, Muslim.")

Deconstruction Theory

Deconstruction, pioneered by Jacques Derrida, analyzes language to reveal how meaning is relational and never fully fixed. Derrida's concept of *différance* highlights this instability, suggesting that meaning is perpetually deferred because definitive definitions are impossible. Deconstructionists argue that true definitions are elusive, as we often understand things through contrast and negation rather than through inherent qualities.

The deconstructionist examines not only what the text says but also what it doesn't say in order to ultimately conclude that no text has one fixed meaning and that if one can break down language enough, they will discover that it can mean anything to anyone.

Derrida's work is best understood as a critique of metaphysics, and deconstruction is less a method than a process unfolding within the philosophical text itself. This ongoing project established Derrida as one of the most influential French philosophers of the 20th century.

Deconstruction, as articulated by Derrida, isn't merely a critical method but a way of understanding how language creates and distributes meaning. Derrida



highlights the inherent instability of language, arguing that meaning is fluid and that the connection between a word (signifier) and its meaning (signified) is never absolute, thereby challenging traditional binary oppositions. He rejects logocentrism—the idea of a direct, stable link between words and their meanings—positing that meaning is always deferred and multifaceted (*différance*), making complete interpretation impossible.

Application of Deconstruction in Postmodernism

Challenging Western Metaphysics: Derrida's deconstruction critically examines the Western philosophical tradition, which has long been dominated by binary oppositions. For example, in texts where concepts like presence are privileged over absence or reason over emotion, Derrida seeks to show how these hierarchies are artificial and contingent. Deconstruction reveals how meaning is constructed through exclusion and difference, not through fixed oppositions.

Textual Analysis: In his postmodern works, Derrida applies deconstruction to literary and philosophical texts, revealing the inherent contradictions and ambiguities within them. His famous deconstruction of Plato's "Pharmakon" in the text *Plato's Pharmacy* highlights how a single term can carry multiple meanings (both medicine and poison), destabilizing the text's supposed clarity. This analysis demonstrates

how texts are never complete or self-sufficient, as they rely on interpretations that are fluid and variable.

Implications of Deconstruction

Destabilization of Meaning: By revealing the instability of meaning, deconstruction leads to the realization that all texts and systems of thought are open to multiple interpretations. This challenges the authorial intent and emphasizes the role of the reader or interpreter in constructing meaning.

Ethical Dimensions: Derrida's approach has been extended into ethical and political realms. By deconstructing dominant narratives, it opens up spaces for marginalized voices and critiques established systems of power and oppression. Derrida argues that deconstruction promotes an ethics of responsibility, wherein one must always be open to alternative perspectives and meanings.

Criticism of Deconstruction: While Derrida's work has had a profound influence on philosophy, literary theory, and anthropology, deconstruction has also faced criticism. Some argue that it leads to relativism or nihilism, as it seems to suggest that no interpretation or meaning is definitive. Others claim that deconstruction is overly abstract and lacks practical application, particularly in fields where concrete conclusions are necessary.



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