

Definitions of Deconstruction – mostly upon Jacques Derrida's death (2004)

"Mr. Derrida's name is most closely associated with the often cited but rarely understood term "deconstruction." Initially formulated to define a strategy for interpreting sophisticated written and visual works, deconstruction has entered everyday language. When responsibly understood, the implications of deconstruction are quite different from the misleading clichés often used to describe a process of dismantling or taking things apart. The guiding insight of deconstruction is that every structure -- be it literary, psychological, social, economic, political or religious -- that organizes our experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion. In the process of creating something, something else inevitably gets left out.

These exclusive structures can become repressive -- and that repression comes with consequences. In a manner reminiscent of Freud, Mr. Derrida insists that what is repressed does not disappear but always returns to unsettle every construction, no matter how secure it seems."

Mark C. Taylor, "What Derrida Really Meant," NYT Op-Ed, p. 26, Oct 14, 2004.

"[H]e was known as father of deconstruction, method of inquiry that asserts that all writing is full of confusion and contradiction, that author's intent could not overcome inherent contradictions of language itself, robbing texts of truthfulness, absolute meaning and permanence."

Jonathan Kandell, "Jacques Derrida, Abstruse Theorist, dies in Paris at 74."
NYT-Arts, October 10, 2004, p.1.

Derrida himself (qtd. [selectively] in Kandell):

"[In a] 1993 paper he presented at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, in New York, [Derrida] began: 'Needless to say, one more time, deconstruction, if there is such a thing, takes place as the experience of the impossible.'

and

"[T]o Dinitia Smith, a Times reporter, in a 1998 interview. 'Deconstruction requires work. If deconstruction is so obscure, why are the audiences in my lectures in the thousands? They feel they understand enough to understand more.' / Asked later in the same interview to at least define deconstruction, Mr. Derrida said: 'It is impossible to respond. I can only do something which will leave me unsatisfied.'"

"Derrida partly provided the thrill of sheer nerve: daring to write something that wouldn't just modify interpretations but challenge the entire philosophical and literary enterprise. His was an imperial ambition, one inherited from Nietzsche and Heidegger: don't reinterpret. Uninterpret. Show not just that some formulations are mistaken, but that all are. And that, moreover, they have to be. Show how all of Western thought is based on a type of ignorance or incompleteness, that everyone who claimed to get the point was missing the point."

Edward Rothstein, "The Man who Showed us How to Take the World Apart,"
NYT-Arts, Oct 11, 2004, p.1.

"Deconstruction, Mr. Derrida's primary legacy, was no exception. Originally a method of rigorous textual analysis intended to show that no piece of writing is exactly what it seems, but rather laden with ambiguities and contradictions, deconstruction found ready acolytes across the humanities and beyond -- including many determined to deconstruct not just text but the political system and society at large.

Today, the term has become a more or less meaningless artifact of popular culture, more likely to turn up in a description of an untailored suit in the pages of Vogue than in a graduate seminar on James Joyce."

Emily Eakin, "The Theory of Everything, RIP", NYT Week in Review, p. 12.

"The Algerian-born thinker who called Paris home developed a technique of cultural analysis called deconstruction, which suggests that meaning is always elusive, always endlessly deferred, and that what we know -- or think we know -- is forever contingent on where we're coming from. Texts -- and texts can be buildings and bridges and songs and films and sentences, as well as manuscripts -- are eternally in flux. There is no final, permanent truth, only a steady interplay of interpretations and perspectives and prejudices. . .

But to a generation of literary critics and scholars, Derrida's ideas were a bracing, liberating force. He opened up a whole new way of looking at language: not as a fixed block of type produced by an all-knowing author, upon which busy readers must labor to discover the single right meaning -- but as a slippery, elusive contingency. Texts are not granite; they're air. They are shape-shifters. They gently mock the notion of stability.

Some people find these ideas troubling or even dangerous. If there is no transcendent and ultimately knowable truth, what happens to morality? If there are no inherent meanings, doesn't communication turn into babble? . . .

To disenfranchise ourselves: That's the task of deconstruction, and it lives at the center of Derrida's fertile, complex, ever-contentious legacy."

Julia Keller, "Jacques Derrida: Rebel with a cause celebre - Thinker's deconstruction technique was a victim of its own popularity and challenged that which we know -- or think we know."
Chicago Tribune, Oct 17, Arts and Entertainment, p.8.

"Derrida's starting point was his rejection of a common model of knowledge and language, according to which understanding something requires acquaintance with its meaning, ideally a kind of acquaintance in which this meaning is directly present to consciousness. For him, this model involved "the myth of presence", the supposition that we gain our best understanding of something when it - and it alone - is present to consciousness.

He argued that understanding something requires a grasp of the ways in which it relates to other things, and a capacity to recognise it on other occasions and in different contexts - which can never be exhaustively predicted. He coined the term "différance" (différance in French, combining the meanings of difference and deferral) to characterise these aspects of understanding, and proposed that différance is the ur-phenomenon lying at the heart of language and thought, at work in all meaningful activities in a necessarily elusive and provisional way.

The demonstration that this is so largely constituted the work of deconstruction, in which writers who laid claim to purity or transparency or universality - and this would include most of the significant figures in the philosophical tradition - could be shown, by close and careful reading, to be undoing those very claims in the act of making them by their implicit recognition of the ongoing work of différance. . .

Derrida's writing is strange and difficult because it has to be: to test the limits of what can be thought is to test the limits of what can be articulated."

Derek Attridge and Thomas Baldwin, "Jacques Derrida: Controversial French philosopher whose theory of deconstruction gave us new insights into the meaning of language and aesthetic values," Monday October 11 2004 *The Guardian*.

see also:

Remembering Derrida (website) – which began with the posting of the letter and signatures in protest of Kandell's NYT obituary (perceived as callous and reductive).

http://www.humanities.uci.edu/remembering_jd/