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DR. ROGER DUKE

BY

JAMES REGGIE HOWARD

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Introduction

This paper deals with concepts that rank high on the spectrum of abstractness, yet these concepts involve issues that touch the very fabric of our humanity. Both *deconstruction* and *relevance theory* take considerable effort to comprehend, and even more effort to explain in a clear and coherent manner. Deconstruction is difficult, partly because it purposefully seeks to elude definition. Relevance theory is difficult because it is encased in its own institutional vocabulary. The author has attempted to summarize the core content of both movements, and to do so with respect and fairness. The major source used for understanding deconstruction is the excellent book, *Derrida for Beginners*, by Jim Powell.¹ His major source for understanding relevance theory is through interactions with Stephen Pattemore and through his book, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*.²

This paper is organized into three parts. First, deconstruction is explained and summarized. Second, deconstruction is analyzed and found lacking. This section is not a point by point rebuttal, not an exposé, but rather an attempt to demonstrate that a faulty foundation or presupposition of Derrida's is fatal to its usefulness. Third, advances in the field of linguistics are set forth which antiquate deconstruction. These advances are known as relevance theory. This theory is presented as a replacement for an antiquated model of communication.

Deconstruction is a powerful force which has disseminated its influence through all of Western civilization. It deals with fundamental issues of understanding and interpreting texts, therefore anyone who uses and values written words needs to recognize deconstruction's influences and deal with them in wisdom.

This paper claims that deconstruction is now obsolete. It argues not from a particularly Christian perspective but from advances in learning that postdate Derrida.

What Deconstruction Says and Does

Jacques Derrida and deconstructionism did not come out of nowhere. Centuries of influences – philosophers, religious and cultural developments, technology, etc. – created a climate for Derrida to produce his seminal work. Powell says well, “If Derrida has managed to turn much of Western thought on its head, he has done so only by standing on the shoulders of Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Saussure.”³

¹ Jim Powell, *Derrida for Beginners* (New York, NY: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., 1997).

² Stephen Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse, Discourse, Structure and Exegesis* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press).

³ Powell, 13.

Derrida developed his ideas under the term deconstruction. He unveiled deconstruction at a most opportune time. Structuralism, which is much the opposite of deconstruction, was suddenly in vogue. It promised a scientific basis for anthropology, literary criticism, and other such fields of study. But as Powell says, “Before it could ever make its mark in America, Derrida, the final speaker at the Johns Hopkins Seminar heralding the promise of structuralism, exposed its weakness. For structuralism depends upon structures, and structures depend upon centers—and Derrida called into question the very idea of a stable centre. The era of **poststructuralism** had been ushered in.”⁴

The perspective that Derrida presented has a strong sociological element. He sees social conflict occurring in every interpersonal environment. This conflict is between those in the center (the powerful) and those on the outside (the marginalized). Derrida’s angle on things, as presented by Powell, is that every center is seeking to repel others rather than seeking to attract. He says, “The problem with centers, for Derrida, is that they attempt to exclude. In doing so they ignore, repress or *marginalize* others (which become the Other).”⁵ Society is therefore in perpetual conflict, and communication, or better yet, the texts used to communicate are faulty because they all have a biased center.

It is in the treatment of written texts that the philosophy of deconstruction shows itself in concrete terms. Every text, no matter how well it was constructed, no matter how widely it has been received and understood, and how well it is regarded, it has centers which need to be recognized and dealt with in a proper manner. As Powell aptly says, “**Deconstruction** is a tactic of decentering, a way of reading, which first makes us aware of the **centrality** of the central term. Then it attempts to *subvert* the central term so that the marginalized term can become central.”⁶ Deconstruction is intentionally altering the meanings of texts, causing a breakdown in communication that is irreparable. As Powell says:

Derrida claims that deconstruction is a political practice, and that one must not pass over and neutralize this phase of subversion too quickly. For this phase of reversal is needed in order to subvert the original hierarchy of the first term over the second. But eventually, one must realize that this new hierarchy is equally unstable, and surrender to the complete free play of the binary opposites in a nonhierarchical way. Then you can see that both readings, and many others, are equally possible.⁷

⁴ Powell, 19. The seminar mentioned took place in 1996, Derrida’s lecture was titled, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ Powell, 28.

This process has three very strong implications: First, in the age of deconstruction, no text can be regarded as authoritative. In fact, no interpretation of a text can be accepted as authoritative. Second, texts are not bound by such concepts as “original meaning” or “authorial intent.” The author, once he publishes his work, has no right, no authority to expect his work to be understood in a particular way. Third, people can never truly understand one another, because personal bias and the weaknesses of language make truly effective communication impossible.

Deconstruction therefore causes isolation and barriers to communication that cannot be overcome from within its system. Communication within the system can be illustrated in two ways. The first shows human isolation, the second shows the randomness of communication. First, social interaction can be pictured like bumper-cars at a fair. Each person is moving around in his own contraption, with padding surrounding it. Interaction consists of bumping into people, ricocheting, randomly bumping others who are also bumping and ricocheting. No matter how much interaction each person experiences, they are still left isolated, unable to have meaningful communication and relationship. Second, the production of texts can be compared to electricity in a home. The text is a phenomena, it has power to communicate just as electricity is a force going into the household. The power company supplies the electricity, but once it enters the house the electricity will manifest itself in a multitude of ways: It will produce light through the light bulbs, heat through the furnace, news and music through the radio, coffee through the coffee maker, etc. An author may intend his text to communicate one way, but once his work is out in public it will be understood in a multitude of ways, all of which are just as valid. This is the end result of deconstruction.

Constructed on a Fault

It is tempting at this point to write a rebuttal, to lay out a dozen reasons why deconstruction is misled, misdirected, and misconstrued. Instead, what the current writer would like to do is address one fault upon which deconstruction is built. It is like a geological fault which could open and swallow the thing as a whole.

Structuralism and much of modern linguistics was built on a theory of communication which is inadequate and is now antiquated. This theory is explained by Pattemore as follows, “An influential paradigm over several decades has been the code model, whereby a sender encodes a thought in a linguistic message which is transmitted by some medium to a receiver, who decodes the message to produce a replication of the original thought.”⁸ This model is not wrong, but it is inadequate. It is the inadequacy of this widely-held view of communication which Derrida attacked and overcame.

This is what Derrida did to the paradigm:

⁸ Pattemore, 13.

1	The speaker/writer	Treated as superfluous. The originator is cancelled out.
2	The code	Treated as faulty and needing repair, then the repair needs repair until the code gets so tangled up that it goes nowhere. ⁹
3	The listener/reader	Replaced by the deconstructionist who knows more about life and sociology and everything else that matters.

Of the three steps of this paradigm, Derrida does not seem to justify steps one and three. He just assumes the right to remove the author and replace the original readers. Derrida concentrates on the middle one, the code.

Derrida points to the phenomena of ambiguity as a strong reason that the code can never be accepted as a single meaning. His argument is complex and intentionally vague. Powell does a masterful job of explaining:

Any attempt to *define* **différance**, which is **not** a word or a concept, involves one in a logical contradiction. For like Derrida’s other hinge mechanisms (*pharmakon*, *supplement*, *hymen*, etc.) it is ambiguous. Its play hinges on at least two meanings.

Yet, no meaning of **différance ever** arrives, because it is always already **suspended** between two meanings: “to differ” and “to defer”—without ever settling into one or the other.

And if the meaning of **différance** is (n)either “**to defer**” (n)or “**to differ**” —then there is no stable meaning that can ground it in the present—that can stabilize its shape-shifting. It will always dance around like a trickster. It can never be reduced to any one meaning at any one time.¹⁰

Derrida is willing to invent homonyms to show the fluidity of language. He made up the word “hauntology” to act as a homonym of “ontology.” In French the words sound the same because the “h” is silent. He uses this supposed pair to say far more than they could ever say, and since meanings are fluid, they continue to say more and more.¹¹

It should be obvious, though, that once a text is taken out of its setting it will become less definite. In Derrida’s work, **The Post Card**, he constructs an opposition between “philosophy’s desire to communicate eternal truths independent of time and space”¹² with something that is by its nature, punctiliar, a series of postcards. “For postcards are about circumstances, about time, about place.”¹³ Derrida’s point seems to

⁹ Actually, Derrida would not appreciate the phrase, “goes nowhere.” He delights in the “play” of language and seems to think this should be enough to satisfy everyone.

¹⁰ Powell, 119.

¹¹ Ibid., 140-141.

¹² Ibid., 138.

¹³ Powell, 138.

be as Powell says, “That mere circumstances always influence the supposedly universal and eternal truth claims of philosophy.”¹⁴

The great contradiction in Derrida’s thought is that while he can reject any and all claims of universal truth (because circumstances always affect our understanding of it), yet he can autonomize individual texts (by supposedly removing them from the original transmitter and receptors) as if the text (the abstract) has more significance than the human participants. This is where Derrida deconstructed a faulty model of communication. There is a new model that better explains how communication takes place effectively. It emphasizes the human participants and their shared cognitive environment as the key to understanding the communication process. This model is called relevance theory.

Deconstruction made Irrelevant

Relevance theory was presented by D. Sperber and D. Wilson in 1986 through their seminal work, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*.¹⁵ Pattemore explains how the deficiencies of the code model lead to their development of relevance theory:

While this model may accurately represent some *physical* communication processes, it has at best only partial success with the *psychological* dimensions of human communication. In particular, it offers no adequate explanation for the importance of inference at all levels (from simple gestures, through figures of speech such as hyperbole and irony, all the way to complex symbolic representation and institutional language), whereby what is communicated is something other than what is encoded in the message.¹⁶

An example of the pervasive use of inference is a father saying to his kids, “I’m glad no one around here likes ice cream.” Analysis of the code is entirely insufficient to explain the kids’ sudden reaction of jumping for joy and racing to the kitchen. The father effectively conveyed a message that contradicted and superseded the linguistic code. Relevance theory deals with the factors involved in communication above-and-beyond the actual code.¹⁷ It takes effort initially to understand the theory, but as it is understood, it can be tested myriad times a day as to its truthfulness. Relevance theory makes good sense.

There are three assumptions or insights upon which relevance theory is based. These three need to be clarified before the concept of “relevance” can be understood correctly. The three insights are explained here. First, *much more is communicated than*

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sperber, D., and D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1st ed. 1986; 2nd ed, 1995).

¹⁶ Pattemore, 13.

¹⁷ “Relevance Theory . . . provides a rigorous, pragmatic account of the process of communication, including especially the role of inference.” Pattemore, 13.

just the meaning of the words. The extra things communicated are referred to as *inferences*. This concept is illustrated above with the story of kids and ice cream. It is important to understand at this point that the inferences are not periphery or additional to the communication, they are essential bearers of the message. Second, *humans carry around with them vast knowledge, but at any given time only some of the knowledge is forefronted for immediate use*, the rest is archived. This forefronted knowledge is referred to as being *manifest*. And the full set of what is manifest at any given time is referred to as *cognitive environment*.¹⁸ Third, effective communication involves *the purposeful intention to impact, alter, or in some way affect the receptor's cognitive environment*. This is going on all the time. When a mother says to her children while they climb out of the car, "This is a parking lot, guys," she is not telling them something new, but she is forefronting the knowledge that cars can be dangerous and that this fact needs a behavioral response. The term used for this concept is *ostension*. Sperber and Wilson explain: "*Ostensive stimuli* as we will call them, must satisfy two conditions: first they must attract the audience's attention; and second they must focus it on the communicator's intentions."¹⁹

These three insights above combine and work together in what is referred to as "*ostensive-inferential communication*."²⁰ This communication model explains language use more completely and accurately than structuralism and the code model ever could. Linguistic code is only a portion of what is involved in communication. The human participants, and what they bring to it, are an absolutely essential part of the communication equation. Deconstruction, with its practice of autonomizing texts, ended up with aporia, undecidability,²¹ because their data was incomplete. They focused their attention on partial evidence.

More needs to be said about the participants in a communication situation. The communicator has a set of forefronted knowledge, memories, thoughts, and concerns (his cognitive environment) and he has something within this mix that he wants to make known to the receptor. In order to be effective, he needs to use knowledge, memory, thoughts, and concerns that the receptor shares (the mutual cognitive environment). The speaker has the responsibility to preprocess and package the message so that the receptor will receive it as intended. Sperber and Wilson state:

¹⁸ "A fact is *manifest* to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true . . . A *cognitive environment* of an individual is a set of facts that are manifest to him . . . Which assumptions are more manifest to an individual during a given period or at a given moment is again a function of his physical environment on the one hand and his cognitive abilities on the other." Sperber and Wilson, 39.

¹⁹ Sperber and Wilson, 153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

²¹ Powell, 153.

It is up to the communicator to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the audience will have accessible and be likely to use in the comprehension process. The responsibility for avoiding misunderstandings also lies with the speaker, so that all the hearer has to do is go ahead and use whatever code and contextual information come most readily to hand.²²

The receptor comes to the communication situation with the assumption that the communicator desires to affect his (the receptor's) knowledge, memories, thoughts, and concerns (i.e. cognitive environment). The receptor listens to see if the speaker has something indeed worth integrating and will search for a context in which the speaker's words bear their greatest meaning. Pattemore explains:

Communication works because the audience make the assumption that the communicator intends to be relevant. The audience do not need to determine in advance the context within which to process a communication. Sperber and Wilson suggest that the choice of an appropriate context continues through the comprehension process and is governed by the search for relevance. The immediate context in which an utterance occurs is only a starting point, and the context for comprehension can be extended in one or more different directions throughout the comprehension process.²³

This is at the heart of relevance theory. The receptor is looking for meanings that fit his own situation. "The audience does not take a particular context as given and proceed to assess the relevance of the communication. Instead relevance is taken as given and a context selected to justify that assumption."²⁴

There is a sliding scale of how the receptor recognizes relevance:

Information which is totally new, with no connection to the audience's existing cognitive environment, will have no *contextual* implications. Neither will old information. It is information that is new but has connections with the existing environment which will have the greatest contextual effects (including negating, strengthening, extending, or enriching existing assumptions). This is *relevant* information in Sperber and Wilson's terminology.²⁵

It is this scale of relevance that moves an audience back and forth between boredom and keen interest. If the message can be seen as new and relevant, it is worth integrating. If it is seen as old and/or unrelated to life, then it is not worth processing, not worth integrating into one's cognitive environment.

²² Sperber and Wilson, 43.

²³ Pattemore, 17.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Pattemore, 15-16.

An audience understands a communication by bringing to it the most accessible elements of the mutual cognitive environment and deciding on the meaning that produces the best contextual effects for the least processing effort. The communicator, knowing this, produces the stimulus which will lead the receptor to his intended meaning.²⁶

There is much more to be said about relevance theory. Questions will arise as to how it applies to sizable written texts, and especially ancient written texts that are linguistically, culturally, and historically removed. These questions are answered by relevance theory but they lie beyond the scope of this paper and will have to be dealt with at a later date.²⁷

Conclusion

At least one thing should be clear through the analysis of deconstruction and relevance theory, namely, the two are mutually incompatible. One autonomizes and subverts texts, and ends up with “undecidability.” The other emphasizes the participants and what they bring to the communication equation and texts are seen as stimulus.

In tying together the major points of this paper, it is amazing to see that Derrida is actually a master of ostensive-inferential communication. He participated in a seminar heralding the promise of structuralism, and as its final speaker he was able -with one lecture- to stop structuralism in its tracks. He used the tightly knit cognitive environment of that seminar to negate the very thing they gathered to promote. He presented new information (the problem of centering) into the strongly accepted context (structuralism) and produced massive contextual effects (the rejection of structuralism and openness toward deconstruction) in the receptors. This was quite an accomplishment for someone who questions the very ability to communicate precisely and effectively.

Structuralism and deconstruction were established while using the code model of communication. The code model is unable to account for all the factors involved in human verbal and written communication. Relevance theory is a more complete and accurate model of how humans actually communicate. Deconstruction is unable to function as an analytical tool for ostensive-inferential communication. Yes, the communicator has biases, but so does the receptor. Bias is a part of humanity, an acceptable part of humanity. Yes, there is ambiguity in language use, but the intelligent communicator is able to eliminate many of these ambiguities by preprocessing and packaging his message in a form the receptor could be expected to understand it. The receptor also takes an active part in the process by seeking the context for understanding that is most optimally relevant. Communication takes place not with 100% accuracy, but with enough clarity that people can genuinely understand one another. It is time to recognize that deconstruction as a philosophy and as a practice is forever antiquated.

²⁶ Ibid., 17.

²⁷ The authoritative source for Relevance Theory is Sperber and Wilson’s 2nd edition. A more accessible explanation and in-depth application can be found in Pattemore’s book.

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