

6 . Beyond the Subject: Structuralism and Poststructuralism

Decentring the Subject

Structuralism and poststructuralism can be understood as the culmination of a number of more sceptical strains of post-Enlightenment thought. These philosophical positions emerge clearly in the twentieth century, as a reaction to Hegelianism and Marxism on the one hand and Sartrean existentialism and phenomenology on the other. The associated critiques of humanism and the 'subject' develop tendencies apparent for some time both in philosophy and in the human and social sciences.¹ In this development Nietzsche, the later writings of Heidegger and the linguistics of Saussure play an important role. The major outcome of these changes is a radical questioning of the privileged philosophical and political status of the subject within humanism and rationalism. Both what we have termed the dominant tradition of Enlightenment thought and some of its most influential continental critics rely on views of the philosophical subject which, according to structuralists and poststructuralists, cannot be sustained. But in what sense does Enlightenment rationalism tend to accord a privileged status to the subject?

In effect, the philosophical rationalism of the modern period holds human reason, or subjectivity, responsible for the validity of its own beliefs, values and decisions. Human reason is regarded as the sole and sufficient arbiter of truth, goodness and justice. Rationalism also challenges the authority of inherited tradition, whether in the form of the received wisdom of classical antiquity or the supernatural claims of religion and the Church. Knowledge, values and even political

power are to be placed on new and more secure, because more rational, foundations. In support of these ambitious claims for the power of human reason, rationalist philosophers make certain assumptions about both the cognitive and the practical subject, that is the subject both as site of knowledge and as source of values. Both epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, and the attempt to provide rational foundations for morality become central preoccupations. Descartes's founding of knowledge on the certainty of self-consciousness is an influential instance. Kant transposes epistemological inquiry to a transcendental level, depersonalizing the subject or ego in the process. The subject of knowledge becomes abstract mind or reason, a reconstruction of the cognitive capacities of human or rational beings in general, or in other words capacities which every sane individual can be presumed to possess. The cognitive subject in this sense remains central to much subsequent philosophy in both continental and analytical traditions.

Emerging alongside philosophical rationalism were a variety of forms of moral and political individualism. From the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation expressed this tendency within the religious sphere, pointing to individual conscience rather than the authority of priests as the criterion of right action and salvation. Taking this tendency to its extreme, in the nineteenth century Kierkegaard would assert the 'subjective truth' of existence against the institutionalized Protestant Church.² The ultimate moral authority of the individual is also implicit in such philosophical doctrines as utilitarianism, intuitionism and subjectivism, which account for morality in terms of the pleasure or pain (happiness or unhappiness), the considered moral intuitions or the attitudes and emotions of individuals respectively. Liberalism asserts the right of the individual to a 'private sphere' free from all external interference. The ideal of democracy claims the right of individuals to take part in or to determine the actions of their own government.³ The bounds of legitimate political agency are also extended beyond the restricted sphere of rulers or princes, typically to include 'responsible' individuals or 'men of property' and their parties and factions. Rulers are expected to justify their actions in the face of a largely bourgeois public opinion. Politics in the modern sense, as opposed to mere rule, begins to assume a historically novel importance. Overall, a similar position of authority is claimed for the subject in the practical sphere as epistemology implies in the theory of knowledge.

However, both in philosophy and in the human or social sciences a series of developments soon threatens the newly acquired status of the subject. The intellectual 'decentring' of the subject can be traced

even to Kant's transcendental philosophy, despite the fact that Kant promotes the subject to a position of the highest epistemological and moral importance. The subject is made responsible both for the essential structure of reality and, as self-legislating rational will, for the moral law as well. Kant claims to identify the necessary and eternal or 'transcendental' features of any subject of knowledge or action. But precisely the transcendental status of Kant's conclusions – the necessity of exactly those structural characteristics of the subject identified by Kant – proved difficult to sustain. Unconvinced by Kant's transcendental deduction, Hegel historicizes and collectivizes the Kantian subject. The bearer of knowledge and ethical life becomes a particular, concrete manifestation of 'mind' or 'spirit' (*Geist*), embodied in the life of a particular historical community. Ultimate truth, or the 'Absolute', is only guaranteed in the historical culmination of a dialectically unfolding series of forms of life and worldviews. By implication, the site of rational assessment is no longer located within the sphere of competence of ordinary historical individuals. The dialectic takes place behind the backs of individual subjects. History manifests the 'cunning of reason', which realizes the aims of the world spirit as the unintended by-product of the actions of individual agents. The site of rational assessment is removed to the final stage of the dialectic (whether already achieved or yet to be realized) or, perhaps, the authority of Hegel himself as self-proclaimed herald and philosophical guarantor of the Absolute.⁴

With Marx a parallel narrative of humanity's historical self-constitution materializes the already historicized subject of Hegelian idealism. The dialectical development of the subject is explained in terms of the relationship between humanity and nature through work or production. The historical process is driven by contradictions within the mode of production rather than by intellectual or conceptual oppositions within worldviews.⁵ The Marxist theory of ideology makes plain the implications of this view for the subject. Consciousness, whether as knowledge or as will, depends on the achievements and limitations of a collective subject which, in turn, corresponds to the society's level of social and economic development. More pointedly, consciousness depends on class. Our beliefs and attitudes, even our most deeply held moral values, reflect our position in society rather than absolute truth.⁶ Thus, the characteristically Enlightenment commitment to universal values of liberty, fraternity and equality is really a reflection of bourgeois conscience and, what is worse, self-interest. These values are no more than projections of the interests of the capitalist class, ideological weapons which could be used to undermine feudalism without endangering capitalist exploitation.

The Marxist theory of ideology represents a further blow to the self-confidence of the cognitive and practical subject. Individual subjects can no longer be presumed to have reliable access to rational criteria of theoretical or moral truth. But as with Hegelian idealism, Marxism does not so much abolish as displace the privileges of the individual subject. These privileges are transferred to a collective historical subject, namely the proletariat which, in virtue of its position within the capitalist mode of production, is destined to overthrow capitalism and achieve true consciousness. Individuals can only achieve true consciousness, as it were vicariously, by subordinating their alienated self to the collective will of the class. In the Leninist tradition the centre of cognitive and practical privilege is further removed to the leadership and policies of the revolutionary party. With the abolition of capitalism and the arrival of communism, the ideological distortions of class society will come to an end. Social relations will become transparent and individuals will attain their true 'species being', the full and undistorted flowering of all their human capacities.

A further major decentring of the subject, this time more psychological than sociological, occurs with the 'psychoanalysis' of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Nineteenth-century psychology took a variety of forms, but two of its most influential currents correspond to the predominant mind–body dualism of post-Cartesian metaphysics. Experimental psychologists investigated the physiology of the brain and nervous system as the causally explanatory reality underlying the mind. Introspectionist psychologists described the distinctive character of mental or psychic states 'from within' or, in other words, through their own subjective experience. In the main, studies of mental disorder or 'pathology' were restricted to the exhaustive description and classification of the sometimes startling phenomena of nervous disease, dementia, hysteria and sexual 'perversion'.⁷ Much more unsettling to the assumptions of nineteenth-century thought were Freud's theories of the unconscious mind. Freudian psychoanalysis challenges the status of the conscious subject of experience, because it suggests that individual consciousness and behaviour can only be understood in terms of the less than rational or transparent workings of the unconscious mind. But again, like Marx, psychoanalysis does not so much cancel as transfer the privileges of the subject.

Freud's distinctive approach can be traced to his early work with Breuer and Charcot on the causes of 'hysteria'. Freud originally qualified as a physiologist and, in fact, throughout his career retained a preference for mechanistic models of explanation and neurophysiological hypotheses. Like Charcot, then, he was struck by the curious

physical symptoms involved in cases of hysteria, a nervous disorder suffered mainly by women and traditionally blamed on the erratic behaviour of the womb.⁸ Hysterical symptoms often made little sense in physiological terms. For example, in the case of a patient complaining of paralysis of the hand, the paralysis would correspond to the patient's common-sense ideas about physiology rather than the actual workings of the body, which do not allow such limited paralysis.⁹ There also seemed to be a relationship between hysterical symptoms and hypnosis. Symptoms could be induced by suggestion, when someone was in a hypnoid state. Later Freud used hypnosis in both diagnosis and cure. These and other observations led Freud to postulate an 'ideogenic' – psychological or mental – rather than physiological aetiology for hysteria. On the other hand, Freud was convinced that the symptoms of the hysteric were not simply voluntary or consciously faked. At least some patients genuinely suffered from an extremely unpleasant mental disorder, which made anything like an ordinary life impossible. If such disorders were involuntary, but nevertheless caused by mental rather than physiological factors, then only *unconscious* mental states could provide an explanation.

Freud went on to elaborate a series of related concepts describing the relationship between conscious and unconscious mind. Concepts such as trauma, repression, resistance, ego, id and superego have become part of our everyday vocabulary. He also developed a number of techniques for gaining access to the unconscious mind. Most famously, word association and the analysis of dreams are two significant tools in what he began to call 'psychoanalysis'. In his case studies Freud claimed a number of impressive cures with the help of these techniques.¹⁰ But the implications of his theories extend far beyond the realm of mental pathology. In fact Freud is concerned with a much wider range of mental phenomena. The impact of the unconscious mind can be recognized in a wide range of apparently normal behaviour. Jokes and slips of the tongue, the forgetting of names or appointments, dreams and fantasies, religion and culture, all can only be properly understood in terms of the unconscious mind.¹¹

Freud's concept of the unconscious mind has far-reaching implications.¹² Consciousness never gives us more than a partial and distorted view of our mental life, so the Cartesian principle that the mind or subject is simply equivalent to a fully transparent consciousness is undermined. On the contrary, for Freud the reasons we give for our actions may be no more than rationalizations, obscuring the real origin of our behaviour in the trauma or unresolved emotional conflicts of early childhood. The conscious mind, even when it enjoys

'healthy' or 'normal' functioning, is ultimately the plaything of the unconscious, the creature of its whims and fancies – subject, in the final instance, to its repressive veto.¹³ In this sense, clearly, Freudian psychoanalysis betokens a further decentring of the subject. The individual subject has no guarantee of 'knowing its own mind'. We may be dupes of our unconscious, just as for Marx we are, for the most part, dupes of history and class. On the other hand, and again with parallels to Marx, psychoanalysis holds out for the conscious self at least some prospect of recovering its sovereignty. A protracted dialogue of analyst and patient promises eventual relief from neurotic and even psychotic symptoms – what has been described as a 'talking cure'.¹⁴ The self can, in principle at least, come to understand the unconscious springs of its conscious states and impulses. In the terms of Lorenzer and Habermas, analysis can help to remove the barriers to a free 'internal communication', a transparent subjectivity.¹⁵ Through the 'depth hermeneutics' of psychoanalysis individuals can hope to approach, if perhaps never to attain – analysis may turn out to be 'interminable' and repression and neurosis may be the inevitable accompaniments of 'civilization' – something like the ideal of transparent selfhood held out by the Cartesian tradition.¹⁶ The subject, as site of cognitive or practical rationality, is dethroned only provisionally.¹⁷

The Break with Humanism

Thus, though in different ways, Hegelian idealism, Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis displace the subject from its privileged position, yet they do not break irrevocably with humanism. Each of these theoretical approaches retains a qualified or conditional role for the subject and so remains within the pale of humanist assumptions. A more decisive break with humanism occurs with further developments in two areas of intellectual activity, namely hermeneutics and linguistics. Both areas are closely concerned with language and, as a result, are of obvious significance for both philosophy and the human sciences. In fact, traditional hermeneutics involves only a provisional decentring of the subject analogous to the decentring of the subject implicit in Marxism and psychoanalysis. The development of the hermeneutic approach within the human sciences, which are concerned in a major way with the interpretation or criticism of texts and the historical reconstruction of past events, reflects increased awareness of the difficulties of mutual understanding. Hermeneutic princi-

ples are called upon, not only where texts present obvious difficulties of interpretation, but all the time, since mutual understanding between subjects can never be taken for granted. To understand any text or utterance involves knowledge of the social and linguistic context in which it was produced – understanding of the part depends upon understanding of the whole. This realization further undermines the position of the subject of discourse, since meaning can no longer be regarded as completely under the control of the individual speaker or writer. However, traditional hermeneutics regards this dependency as remediable. Thus for Dilthey, the recovery of the original intentions or meaning of the author can be achieved through knowledge of the broader cultural and linguistic context. The practice of hermeneutics promises an always improving, though in some versions never perfect, interpretation of meaning – an always improving degree of mutual understanding between subjects.¹⁸

From this point of view, the radical hermeneutics of both Heidegger and Gadamer represents a more decisive break with humanist assumptions. Although it is particularly in his later writings that Heidegger explicitly distances himself from humanism, his abandonment of epistemology for ontology directly implies a rejection of the exaggerated role accorded to the subject in modern western philosophy. The overemphasis of the subject within epistemology corresponds to a reductive 'objectification' of the world in metaphysics. Heidegger associates this objectification with the destructive reign of instrumental thinking and technology. The fundamental starting point of Heidegger's philosophy is, hence, the indivisible unity of 'being-in-the-world' (in effect, the unity of subject and object). Heidegger's position is evident in his reaction to Sartre. Although he claims to follow Heidegger in rejecting the assumptions of modern metaphysics and epistemology, according to Heidegger Sartre still falls into subjectivism. Thus in the 'Letter on Humanism' (1947) Heidegger explicitly responds to Sartre's claim that existentialism is also a humanism, taking issue in particular with the Cartesian assumption that 'one must take subjectivity as his point of departure.'¹⁹ *Being and Nothingness* applies Heidegger's 'hermeneutic of Being' in an explicitly existentialist direction and so misunderstands its basic point. Heidegger's anti-humanist critique of the subject-object dichotomy of western thought leads instead to advocacy of 'thinking' as the 'letting-be' of a transcendent Being. Thinking is to be understood not as the directed activity of a conscious subject but rather as an impersonal openness or receptiveness to the world. Heidegger advocates something close to a religious attitude of humility, a deferential attentiveness to Being. Indeed, the almost mystical

status accorded to Being has led some to see it as a cipher for God, despite the fact that, according to Heidegger, this attitude 'can be theistic as little as atheistic'.²⁰ Still, it can hardly be denied that 'thinking' takes us a long way from the humanist assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism.

Of course, anti-humanism in Heidegger's sense is not equivalent to the assertion of the worthlessness of human life. There is a clear distinction between anti-humanism and the 'affirmation of inhumanity'.²¹ Rather the objection is to any philosophy of 'values', which reduces the worth of things to their status as 'valued by some subject'. There are clearly affinities with the anti-humanism of Nietzsche, who provides an incisive diagnosis of humanism's arrogant premise:

The whole attitude of 'man *versus* the world,' man as world-denying principle, man as the standard of the value of things, as judge of the world, who in the end puts existence itself on his scales and finds it too light – the monstrous impertinence of this attitude has dawned upon us as such, and has disgusted us – we now laugh when we find 'Man *and* World' placed beside one another, separated by the sublime presumption of the little word 'and'!²²

Indeed, humanism is held responsible for many of the characteristic vices of modern society, including its not infrequent inhumanity. For the technological attitude, which is one significant expression of humanism, all beings, whether human or non-human, are manipulable objects available for exploitation. Nature too is 'set-upon' as a mere object, as nothing more than a 'standing-reserve' or resource for human use. Even with what would now be called ecological tourism, nature is treated as 'an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry'. Even 'man', as the supposed subject of this instrumental relationship with nature, is reduced to an object in the same way: 'If man is challenged, ordered, to do this, then does not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve?'²³ Indeed, the historical guilt of humanist philosophy may extend even further than this. Humanist arrogance is held responsible for colonialism, genocide and even the holocaust. The technological and bureaucratic sophistication of the Nazi genocide is a striking instance of modernity and, for some, also humanism, despite its evident inhumanity.

Certainly, then, although Heidegger's philosophical anti-humanism may explain his less than robust commitment to Enlightenment values such as equality and liberty, it does not so obviously account for his association with Hitler's national socialism or his subsequent tardiness in disowning this involvement.²⁴ The injunction to be 'atten-

tive to Being', like the call to obey the will of God, is in principle compatible with almost any political stance. On the other hand, the evident difficulty of 'thinking' in its full Heideggerian sense, with the suggestion that only the philosophically adept are capable of achieving the appropriate relationship with Being, provides a possible foothold for authoritarian claims. It may be true that when Heidegger spoke in 1935 of 'the internal truth and the greatness of the movement', he was not speaking of the Nazis. As Lyotard interprets it, Heidegger's position is that,

'those people [who] were far too limited in their thinking' . . . could only mask and mislead the authentic anxiety that Heidegger thinks he recognises in the desperate search (the 1930s) which, at that time, projects the Volk towards a decision, a resolution that may be in accord with what is 'peculiar' to it. The movement that derives from the unbearable anxiety of being thrown before nothingness, Heidegger believes, needs 'knowledge' in order to guide and resolve itself to a decision.²⁵

But a philosophy which shelves so steeply into obscurity and mysticism offers little apparent resistance to the charismatic despot.

Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics surely represents a less questionable development of Heidegger's anti-humanist approach. In a clear departure from Cartesian assumptions, which ground the existence of both an objective world and other minds on a self-founding and transparent consciousness, for Gadamer it is the subject which is ontologically derivative. The subject exists only within the irreducibly intersubjective medium of understanding and language. Understanding is not only and not primarily one dimension of the knowledge of a subject, as it was for Dilthey, but rather the medium in which the subject has its existence. In other words, Gadamer repeats Heidegger's move from epistemology to ontology. Understanding is conceived not 'as a subjective process of man over and against an object but the way of being of man himself'.²⁶ Accordingly, hermeneutics is not simply the characteristic method of the human sciences, but the key to truth in general. By the same token, the close relationship between understanding and historicity, already identified by Dilthey, characterizes not just the objects but also the subject of acts of interpretation. It is not only the historical text which is inseparable from a concrete historical, cultural and linguistic context. The subject is situated not only, as it were, horizontally in the dimension of language or understanding but also vertically in the dimension of history and tradition. Understanding always as much derives from a particular perspective as it aims at a historical context. A corollary of this view of the subject is that the author of a historical text can no

longer be regarded as the ultimate authority on its meaning. The work is understood not solely or, perhaps, even principally as the product of an individual subject. From the perspective of Gadamer's hermeneutics the subject – whether as author or as interpreter – is much less important than the surrounding medium of understanding or language itself.

An even more radical challenge to the subject is evident in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas (1906–), who blames the humanist focus on identity, sameness and the subject for a deep-seated neglect of the 'other' in western thought – a neglect which finds its most horrifying expression in the death camps and killing fields of the twentieth century. Levinas's 'genetic phenomenology' is clearly influenced by Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger but diverges from them in crucial respects. Unlike Hegel, Levinas's dialectic leads not to the comprehensive totality of the 'absolute' but toward 'alterity' or otherness. To this end Levinas also dissociates phenomenology from any remaining, Husserlian infatuation with the transcendental subject. Even Heidegger's ontological overcoming of subjective consciousness for the sake of a greater 'attentiveness to Being' is left behind. It is western philosophy's very insistence on the primacy of epistemology and ontology, on 'knowledge and understanding' or on 'being and truth', which must be abandoned in the face of the fundamental primacy of the ethical. In Richard Cohen's words, 'alterity must be acknowledged in terms of what *surpasses* understanding absolutely, what is *superior* to the horizons of being and the truth of being, what exceeds or precedes the beginning of philosophy: the *surplus* or *excellence* of ethical command and the infinite responsibilities it calls forth.'²⁷

In the process the 'existent' or subject must be radically decentred: 'the *I* is *first* for-the-other *before* the very firstness of its being for-itself.'²⁸ The 'radical passivity' of the good will is referred to a 'Desire' which 'has its center outside of itself'.²⁹ The subject only comes into existence as always already responsible to otherness. As Bauman puts it, 'I become responsible while I constitute myself into a subject. Becoming responsible *is* the constitution of me as a subject.'³⁰ Levinas also draws deeply on religious texts, particularly those of Judaism, in order to develop his views. In a phrase derived from the Old Testament – and in obvious contrast to Descartes's privileging of consciousness with his 'I think, therefore I am' – the 'Here I am!' founds the self as '*subjectum*, subjectivity as substitution and expiation for the other'.³¹ The active, heroic will favoured by existentialism and even the earlier Heidegger is replaced by a passive will, which declares its availability for the ethical demands of the other. Al-

though, like both Heidegger and Gadamer, Levinas's later work attends increasingly to the nature of language, it is the ambiguous, open expression of the 'saying' rather than the 'coherent language' and 'contaminated' logic of the 'said' that is celebrated.³² Saying speaks 'the hyperbolic passivity of giving, which is prior to all willing and thematization'.³³ It allows a responsibility for the other, which is lost once the 'logocentric' certainties of the 'said' take over: 'Saying opens me to the other before saying what is said, before the said uttered in this sincerity forms a screen between me and the other.'³⁴

Language, albeit in a very different sense, is at the heart of another important source of anti-humanist thought. The 'structural linguistics' of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) has been the main inspiration for the approach known as structuralism.³⁵ Like Gadamer, Saussure focuses on language rather than the speaking or interpreting subject. The challenge to the conventional view of the relationship between subject and language is already evident in Saussure's primary distinction between 'language' (*langue*) and 'speech' (*parole*). It seems obvious to Saussure that language exists as a system of signs (words and meanings) independently of the particular 'speech acts' of individual speaking subjects. The latter are instances of *parole* in the sense of the 'actual speech, the speech acts which are made possible by the language'.³⁶ Speakers can only say or mean something with the help of a language, which already exists before they speak. By implication, the meaning of language cannot be accounted for in the subjective terms of either phenomenology or psychology. Meaning cannot depend on the subject's conscious acts of intending or meaning, as phenomenology suggests, any more than it can be understood as the product of some kind of psychological or mental association between sign and meaning.

A second important step towards structuralism results from Saussure's argument for a 'synchronic' rather than a 'diachronic' approach to language.³⁷ The study of language must break radically with diachronic approaches, which study the changes undergone by language over time. Thus classical philology traces the meaning and phonetic character of words in contemporary languages to their roots in earlier ones. But diachronic accounts can never really explain how a language works. After all, even if the etymological roots of a word can be traced, nothing guarantees that the word has not radically changed meaning in the meantime. In any case, we need to establish the meaning of the root word itself, and we cannot refer this to *its* etymology without falling into a vicious regress. However interesting may be the findings of philology, language must ultimately be explained synchronically. In other words, the meaning and functioning

of language depend on facts about an existing system of signs and meanings rather than on any genetic or developmental story about the origins of this system.

But if meanings are neither inherited from the past nor the creation of intending subjects, how are they to be explained? In Saussure's terms, an explanation of the meaning of a sign must provide an account of the relationship between the 'signifier' – the word or sign considered as a particular sound or set of written characters – and its 'signified' – the meaning or concept the signifier represents. Crucially for Saussure, this relationship does not reflect any intrinsic or essential quality of the signifier, as if meaning were the property of an underlying linguistic substance. The mere existence of different languages proves that the relationship between signifier and signified must be an arbitrary one. Only onomatopoeic words such as 'splash' or 'quack', which sound like the thing to which they refer, are not clearly arbitrary in this way.³⁸ According to Saussure, what gives particular words their meaning is the language as a whole, considered as a structured system of elements. Meaning depends on the differential relations or contrasts between elements, which in the case of language are signs: 'Since the sign has no necessary core which must persist, it must be defined as a relational entity, in its relations to other signs.'³⁹ The meaning of a term like 'blue', for example, depends on the particular colour contrasts which the language allows: blue is whatever is not green or red or yellow and so on. Significantly, different languages embody different conceptual distinctions, which may involve more or less refined gradations of meaning and may even draw conceptual boundaries in different places.

One obvious result of this account of language is that translation between languages is always imperfect, as there can be no guarantee of a one-to-one correlation between their elements. It also implies that the acquisition of language essentially involves mastery of the particular system of distinctions and contrasts which it comprises. A child first learns to speak not by learning the meanings of more and more words as discrete entities, but rather by making basic distinctions between words for mother and father, self and other, good and bad, proceeding to ever more refined distinctions. From this structuralist perspective the only essential feature of any language or code (the only thing which is not arbitrary from the point of view of the linguist) is the fact that it consists of a number of distinguishable and differentially related elements. In principle, there is no difference or priority between spoken and written languages or between these and the 'signed' languages used mainly by deaf people. A structuralist account of meaning also helps to explain how an apparently abstract

medium such as music can have meaning, since music can also be understood as a system of differentially related elements. Overall the structural analysis of meaning reinforces the anti-humanist implications of Saussurean linguistics, because meaning can no longer be attributed to individual speaking subjects. Speakers are only able to mean something with their words thanks to the pre-existing system of linguistic and semantic oppositions embodied in language.

Structuralism is, in effect, the result of extending Saussure's structural method and the associated critique of the subject and humanism to the entire field of the human sciences. With his project of a general semiotics or theory of the sign Saussure had himself anticipated an extension of that kind. Developments in mathematics, logic, biology and psychology – associated with the group of mathematicians known as Bourbaki, Claude Bernard and Waddington in biology and *Gestalt* psychologists – lent support to structuralism.⁴⁰ By the 1960s an array of approaches in the social and human sciences argued that social and cultural phenomena should be treated neither as the intentional products of human subjects nor as the unintentional by-products of history, but rather as structured systems of elements with specific and irreducible rules of combination and transformation. By abstracting from everything subjective (from the conscious self and its intentions or acts of meaning), structuralists also hoped to demonstrate the strictly scientific nature of their enterprise. As Dreyfus and Rabinow put it: 'Structuralists attempt to treat human activity scientifically by finding basic elements (concepts, actions, classes of words) and the rules or laws by which they are combined.'⁴¹ On the other hand, structuralists distanced themselves from the reductively atomistic, analytical approach of the dominant tradition of science, emphasizing instead the distinctive properties of systems as wholes, which are more than the sum of their parts. Structuralism is also a species of holism.⁴²

Perhaps most famously the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–), probably the most persistent, austere and unashamed advocate of structuralism, influenced a generation of social scientists. Lévi-Strauss certainly acknowledged his debt to Saussure as well as to Roman Jakobson.⁴³ Lévi-Strauss also suggests a link with Freud, when he claims that 'anthropology draws its originality from the unconscious nature of collective phenomena.'⁴⁴ Like the rules of a language, patterns of social organization are typically reproduced from one generation to another without being either consciously understood or deliberately chosen. Accordingly society, like language, cannot be understood by simply examining the intentions or actions of individual social agents. Again like Saussure, Lévi-

Strauss's approach is synchronic rather than diachronic. Social and cultural forms are not explained in terms of their origin or genesis, a method which only pushes the problem of explanation one step further back. Rather, each element is explained in terms of its position within the overall system of society as it exists at any one time. The various dimensions of social life (including kinship systems, mythology and rituals) are understood as structured systems of elements with their own distinctive and irreducible rules of combination and transformation. Lévi-Strauss adapts Jakobson's phonological model of binary oppositions between discrete sounds or 'phonemes', analysing mythology as a structured system of 'mythemes'. Similarly, totemism is understood as a sophisticated set of isomorphisms between the structures of the natural and the human world, whereby classifications of animal or plant life correspond to a parallel ordering of human kinship relations.⁴⁵ More dubiously, Lévi-Strauss combines his structuralist methodology with the universalist claim that there is a 'fundamental unity of all cultures'. In other words, he supposes that the diversity of structures found in human societies and cultures can be shown to derive from a single underlying structure (or structure of structures) common to humanity as a whole. Implicitly, such an underlying structure must depend on a conception of shared human nature, albeit a nature that determines how rather than what people think.⁴⁶

Another influential example of structuralist and anti-humanist theory was the Marxism of Louis Althusser (1918–90).⁴⁷ Structuralist Marxism was exciting to many, because it promised to apply the apparently ahistorical, synchronic categories of structuralism, which has often been accused of eliding the dimension of history altogether, to an explicitly and irreducibly historical body of theory. It also seemed to offer a more scientific alternative to historicism and idealism, which had dominated French intellectual life since the revival of interest in Hegel from the 1930s.⁴⁸ Certainly, contemporary capitalist society was readily susceptible to structuralist analysis. After all, Marxism was always an explicitly holistic theoretical approach. Society cannot be understood in the reductive atomistic terms of bourgeois social science, but only according to the dialectical categories of historical materialism, for which society is, in Lukács's terms, a 'totality'.⁴⁹ Althusser's account of the structural relations between relatively autonomous state and non-state 'apparatuses', therefore, is compatible with the spirit of Marx's original theory (though some would claim that it does not add very much either). More radically, Althusser argues that the historical dimension of Marx's theory can be subjected to a similarly structuralist analysis. All that is required

are 'diachronic' rules of transformation to supplement the 'synchronic' rules of combination that govern the structural elements of society at any one time. Once applied, these rules of transformation reveal history as a series of 'ruptures' or discontinuous transformations from one structured whole to the next. In similar terms Althusser provides an account of Marx's own intellectual development, identifying a fundamental break between his earlier 'pre-scientific' writings, which are still infected with essentialism and humanism, and the mature and fully scientific achievement of *Capital*.

Although his immediate adversaries were uncritical followers of the French communist party's line such as Garaudy, Althusser's interpretation of Marx is also directed against Sartre's attempt to combine the insights of existentialism and Marxism. Equally clearly it is diametrically opposed to the Marxism of the Frankfurt School too. For those unashamed 'humanists' it is precisely the scientific pretensions of the later economic writings, which prepare the ground for the positivist and Stalinist degeneration of Marxism. By contrast, Althusser sees Stalinism as a kind of humanism. He describes socialist humanism as an ideological formation that reflects problems unresolved during the Stalinist period in the Soviet Union, just as eighteenth-century bourgeois humanism 'was the visible counterpart to a shadowy inhumanity' or, in other words, to capitalism.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Althusser's anti-humanist Marxism raises a problem often attributed to structuralist analyses, namely how to account for political practice without resorting to some notion of the subject. Revolutionary political practice apparently depends on the deliberate choices of actual historical agents. But an account of history as the rule-governed transformation of impersonal social structures seems hostile to, or at least uninformative about, deliberate human practice of that kind. In other words, it is not clear in the end whether structuralism leaves much room for politics.⁵¹ This problem becomes even more pressing when the strictly determined (indeed, overdetermined) transformations of the capitalist system do not point towards communism. As we shall see, the problem of accounting for political agency will recur in the later incarnations of structuralism and post-structuralism.

Foucault's Genealogy of the Subject

Michel Foucault (1926–84) is responsible for one of the most provocative recent contributions to the anti-humanist critique of the sub-

ject.⁵² Such has been his influence in the areas of social and political theory and philosophy that it has even been suggested that we are living in the century of Foucault.⁵³ His critique of the subject is particularly radical for a number of reasons. In the first place, Foucault accepts the critical implications of the decentring of the subject effected by both the Marxist theory of ideology and Freudian psychoanalysis, which unmask the subject as the formed and deformed product of social and psychological conditions. But secondly, like theorists of both radical hermeneutics and structuralism, Foucault does not entertain any hopes of eventually recovering the lost transparency of the subject at a higher level or a later stage, in the way that both psychoanalysis and Marxism appear to do. It is necessary to break irrevocably with the humanist conception of the subject. Furthermore, like Althusser, one of Foucault's teachers at the École Normale in Paris, Foucault's anti-humanism is explicitly political. According to one of his many programmatic statements the objective of his work 'has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects'.⁵⁴ The play on the ambiguity of 'subject' here reflects his concern, influenced by Althusser's Marxist critique of the bourgeois subject of humanism, to explore the links between the philosophical subject of modern epistemology and political individualism on the one hand and 'subjection' to authority or power on the other. Humanist faith in the subject is no longer merely a sign of philosophical credulity or epistemological laxity, but rather a politically suspect manifestation of modernity. Finally, though, as Foucault's statement also implies, he proposes not so much to dispense altogether with the subject as to provide a historical account of its emergence. His anti-humanist critique denies the subject its privileged moral and epistemological status only to place it near the centre of his thought – even if it is sometimes an absent centre. The subject is no longer a premise but still a prime object of analysis.

Foucault regards the subject as a kind of umbilical cord, entangling modern philosophy and the human sciences from their inception. In *The Order of Things* (1966) Foucault discusses the problematic relationship of modern epistemology and the human sciences after Descartes. He is particularly interested in the intellectual transformation that sets the scene for their subsequent symbiotic development. It is most clearly expressed in Kant's transcendental philosophy which, in order to secure the subject as the absolute condition of all knowledge and action, extracts it from the contingencies of nature and history. The failure of this ruse, the recognition that the subject is a finite historical entity, leaves epistemology with a seemingly insoluble

problem. If knowledge is based on a finite or contingent subject, then the conditions of knowledge are neither timeless nor universal, and anything like absolute truth is unattainable. This predicament, what Foucault calls Kant's 'analytic of finitude', also has serious implications for the 'human sciences', which are implicated in the epistemological conundrum of modern philosophy from the beginning. To ground knowledge in humanity, as the subject of knowledge, makes 'man' an object of his own knowledge. In Dreyfus and Rabinow's words,

Man, who was once himself a being among others, now is a subject among objects. But Man is not only a subject among objects, he soon realizes that what he is seeking to understand is not only the objects of the world but himself. Man becomes the subject and the object of his own understanding.⁵⁵

Foucault describes the contorted responses of modern philosophy to this problem (some of which should by now be familiar, albeit in slightly different terms). The reductive naturalism of positivism brazenly refuses to be troubled by the fact that knowledge is founded on a contingent being, and simply adds the empirical study of 'man' to its agenda. For the historical eschatologies of Hegel and Marx absolute truth eventually arrives with the closure of the dialectic or the arrival of communism. But Foucault is dissatisfied with all of these solutions.

Foucault was, however, variously attracted to structuralism, hermeneutics and phenomenology as promising attempts to evade the interrelated problems of the modern philosophy of the subject and the human sciences. But he soon rejects both phenomenology and structuralism as unwitting accomplices in the subjection of the modern subject. We have already touched upon the basic ambiguity in the notion of subject. Foucault identifies both senses with subjugation and power: 'There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and ties to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.'⁵⁶ The two meanings of subject correspond to complementary processes of 'objectification' and 'subjectification'. In the end structuralism, like positivism, avoids the Kantian dilemma only by treating human beings as mere objects; it is a symptom of the objectifying tendencies of rationalism and modernity, which have constructed modern individuals as objects amenable to power and authority. But hermeneutic practices are implicated in the construction of the modern subject in a complementary way. Both the Catholic confessional and Freudian psychoanalysis are significant examples of the role played by practices of

interpretation in the emergence of contemporary subjects prepared to take responsibility for their own subjection to authority and order.⁵⁷ Where structuralism is involved in the constitution of the subject as object, phenomenology and hermeneutics are involved in its constitution as subject.

Foucault's eventual 'overcoming' of both phenomenology and structuralism only becomes clear with his return to something like a political perspective on modern society and with it the centrality of the concept of power. After brief membership of the French communist party in the 1950s, Foucault's work had, after *Madness and Civilization* and *The Birth of the Clinic*, seemed almost idealist in its exclusive concern with discourse and in the virtual absence of any concept of power.⁵⁸ When Foucault returns to a more 'materialist' approach, it is, however, in terms of Nietzsche rather than Marx. In fact, Marxist philosophies of history become one of the main targets. Foucault is Nietzschean above all in his conviction that power and knowledge are really two sides of the same coin. '[P]ower and knowledge directly imply one another' and, as a result, Foucault sometimes even speaks of 'power/knowledge' as an indivisible amalgam.⁵⁹ On the one hand, as with Nietzsche, the will to truth is just one manifestation of an underlying will to power. Our claims to objective knowledge or absolute truth are at best illusions. Knowledge is always the relative and questionable expression of a particular constellation of relations of power or force. On the other hand, 'the exercise of power is accompanied or paralleled by the production of apparatuses of knowledge.'⁶⁰ The exercise of power requires knowledge. In Smart's words, 'knowledge is not neutral or objective but rather is a product of power relations. In other words knowledge is political in the sense that its conditions of existence or possibility include power relations.'⁶¹ The symbiotic relationship between power and knowledge is, as we shall see, at the heart of Foucault's account of the parallel emergence in modern societies of the human sciences as 'disciplines' with scientific pretensions and what he calls 'disciplinary power'.

The challenge to the Enlightenment's faith in the emancipatory potential of reason is reinforced by a similarly sceptical understanding of history. Foucault is inspired by Nietzsche's project of 'genealogy', which renounces the credulous faith in history as progress and traces specific institutions and forms of discourse to 'naked struggles of power' instead. History should not be understood teleologically as humanity's progress towards some overall purpose or goal, whether this is conceived as freedom and happiness or the classless society. Genealogy is also hostile to any attribution of historical continuity, an attitude that helps to explain Foucault's early attraction to structural-

ism. Already in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault conceives history according to 'categories of discontinuity and difference, the notions of threshold, rupture and transformation, the description of series and limits' as against notions of continuity, tradition, influence, development or evolution.⁶² Genealogical history should 'record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality'; it must 'maintain passing events in their proper dispersion'.⁶³ It is Nietzschean will to power rather than any ultimate purpose which lies behind the confusion of historical change. This confusion is not to be wished away or outwitted by a philosophy of history.

With Foucault's return to Nietzsche the concept of power is placed at the centre of his analysis, and it is important for him to avoid any misunderstanding of its nature. Foucault contests a number of common assumptions that, in his view, tend to blind us to the multifarious manifestations and devious stratagems of power. In the first place, we should not be limited by a 'juridical' view, which sees power only in the negative, prohibitive functions of a repressive state apparatus, law and the police. This view is rendered obsolete by the increasingly positive and productive deployment of power in modern society. Other aspects of the juridical view obscure the nature of this deployment. Power is seen as something that is possessed and consciously exercised by an agent or group of agents over others in order to further its own interests. But power is not a thing that can be possessed or owned in the way such models require. Foucault is unwilling to reify power in this way, preferring to speak of 'power relation' rather than 'power' in order to emphasize that power is not a thing but a mode of interaction: 'Power exists only when it is put into action.'⁶⁴ Nor can power relations be traced to a single underlying mechanism or source such as capitalism or the ruling class. Power constitutes a much broader and more diffuse field than such theories imply. Nor, finally, is it correct to assume that power always involves straightforwardly 'binary' or 'top-down' relations. Power is not 'a property located at the summit of the social order employed in a descending direction over and throughout the entire social domain'.⁶⁵ Relationships of domination exercised by one group over another (for example, by the bourgeoisie over the proletariat or by men over women) are predicated on more finely grained and multi-directional relations of power and resistance at the 'micro-level' of society. Accordingly, social explanation should give priority to this micro-level. In Alan Sheridan's words, 'It is a matter of examining how the techniques and procedures of power operating routinely at the level of everyday life have been appropriated or engaged by more general power or economic interests rather than the converse.'⁶⁶

Foucault's more constructive remarks about the emergence of novel forms of power in western societies illuminate these rather abstract critical points. He is particularly interested in what he calls the 'threshold of modernity': the transition from the 'classical age' of the seventeenth century to the 'modern world' inaugurated with the French Revolution of 1789.⁶⁷ Characteristic of this period is a double operation of power, by which the 'repressive hypothesis' implicit in the juridical conception of power as exclusively prohibitive diverts attention from power's more productive activities, and to the extent that we are unaware of these activities, we are less able to resist them: 'Power as a pure limit set on freedom, is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability.'⁶⁸ The repressive hypothesis becomes all the more functional to the operations of power, as power becomes more positive and productive with the passing of the threshold of modernity. This period witnesses the decline of the more exclusively repressive, 'classical' mode of government, symbolized in the sovereign's 'power of life and death' over the subject. The classical mode of government is gradually replaced by a more productive management of individuals and peoples, which Foucault calls 'bio-power'. Regimes becomes 'managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race': 'what might be called a society's "threshold of modernity" has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies.'⁶⁹ The rise of bio-power is also associated with the spread of racist theories in the nineteenth century.⁷⁰

The deployment of bio-power involves a series of transformations in the nature of what Foucault calls 'governmentality'. This term refers to an increasingly autonomous 'governmental rationality', developed since the Renaissance alongside the narrower *raison d'état* first clearly expressed in Machiavelli's *The Prince*.⁷¹ An important contribution to the emergence of distinctively modern forms of governmentality is made by a number of discourses on the 'science of police' or 'policy', written from the seventeenth century onwards. Although 'police' and 'policing' are now words normally associated with the straightforwardly repressive functions of the state, Foucault reminds us of their originally much broader meaning. Early discussions of policing concerned a lot more than law and order in the contemporary sense. They dealt with nothing less than the welfare of the population as a whole, and so helped to formulate a distinctively 'pastoral' conception of power. The centralizing and bureaucratizing tendencies of modern societies have often been highlighted, for example by Weber and theorists associated with the Frankfurt School. However, for Foucault what is particularly novel about pastoral power is its attention not just to the state of the community as a whole, but

to each individual in particular and in detail throughout the course of his or her life.⁷² Pastoral power's 'individualizing' attention is inspired by the example of the Catholic Church, which through the confessional and other techniques develops 'a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it'.⁷³ Adapting such techniques, modern states apply a similarly pastoral, and similarly intrusive, attention to the health, wealth and welfare of their populations.⁷⁴

As Foucault's conception of 'power/knowledge' would lead us to expect, the rise of pastoral power fosters a new knowledge of 'man'. It is no surprise, then, that the threshold of modernity also sees the emergence of a number of new disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. These 'human sciences' are essentially of two kinds, corresponding to the dual focus of the pastoral state on the population as a whole and on the individuals who make it up. They involve 'the development of knowledge of man around two poles: one globalizing and quantitative, concerning the population; the other analytical, concerning the individual.'⁷⁵ In the first place, there are the globalizing, statistical disciplines of economics, demography, epidemiology and eventually sociology.⁷⁶ Typically these describe general laws governing the normal behaviour of the population as a whole; in fact, they give rise to the notions of population and normality as we understand them. These disciplines enhance the state's ability to control and care for the health of its population, to ensure adequate human resources for its military activities, to promote economic growth and so on. But pastoral power also requires detailed and systematic knowledge of individuals and, consequently, a radical break with the Aristotelian view of knowledge as exclusively concerned with the generalities of *genus* and *species*. The more individualizing disciplines of medicine, psychiatry, psychoanalysis and education study individuals in all their potential eccentricity. Thus, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes how with the emergence of the modern prison 'a specific mode of subjection was able to give birth to man as an object of knowledge for a discourse with a "scientific" status.'⁷⁷ Similarly, the clinic and the asylum were sites for the development of modern medicine and psychiatry.⁷⁸

As these examples suggest, though, pastoral power is not purely a matter of knowledge but involves a range of unmistakably material practices and interventions. These again take two principal forms: the global 'regulatory controls' of a 'bio-politics of the population' and an individualizing 'discipline' or 'anatomo-politics of the body'. Again, it is the latter modality of pastoral power, which is perhaps most interesting and distinctively modern. Alongside the emergence of the

human sciences there is an unprecedented expansion of disciplinary practices, deployed by both state and non-state institutions (in some cases initiated variously by 'do-gooders', reformers, helpful doctors or concerned aristocrats). Disciplinary power is directed primarily at the body; it is designed to produce 'subjected and practised bodies, "docile" bodies'.⁷⁹ But at the same time it aims for psychological effects. In Smart's words, 'discipline is a power which infiltrates the very body and psyche of the individual, which . . . transforms the life and time of the individual into labour-power, that property essential to the capitalist mode of production.'⁸⁰ A variety of techniques are developed to this end, including detailed schedules and timetables, exercises and training, examinations, report-keeping, isolation of inmates and so on. Emblematic of such practices is Bentham's 'panopticon', which Foucault describes as an 'architectural figure' of disciplinary power. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) designed a prison building with individual cells radiating from a central observation point, ensuring the permanent visibility of the inmates to the warder but their complete invisibility to one another. In Foucault's words, the panopticon is a way of 'arranging spatial unities' in order 'to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power'.⁸¹ As this example also makes clear, in the modern period there is a 'reversal of visibility' between sovereign and subject. It is no longer the sovereign who is the focus of attention, but the humble individual, who becomes the not-always-willing object of pastoral care. According to Foucault, similar disciplinary techniques are developed in a range of 'carceral' institutions modelled on the prison (in schools, hospitals, asylums, factories and barracks), all concerned with 'increasing the utility of individuals'.⁸² These characteristically modern institutions are not so much humane products of a more enlightened and rational age as more efficient and more intrusive instruments of an expansive power.

However, the constitution of the subject as an object of disciplinary practices and objectifying disciplines is only half the story. Of equal significance in the genealogy of modern subjectivity is a parallel series of processes, constituting the individual subject *as subject*. Thus Foucault's history of sexuality traces the emergence of a series of discourses and practices that are designed to make the subject more reliably and extensively responsible for itself. The explosion of discourses on sexuality in the nineteenth century, with their minute attention to the details of 'perverse' sexual variations from the norm, is related to the emergent bio-politics of population, but it also contributes to the more intimate constitution of the subject as subject.

Important episodes in this story are the Catholic Confessional, Freudian psychoanalysis and the promotion of 'sexuality' from a relatively unimportant fact about bodies to something decisive for the individual's sense of identity. Foucault's analysis implies a critique of the 'depth hermeneutics' practised in different ways in both psychoanalysis and the confession. The deep truths about the mind or the soul, which these practices of patient interrogation are supposed to uncover, really function as instances of power. Far from uncovering some deeper meaning or truth, their interpretations inscribe in the subject truths that are essentially of their own making. The subject is enticed into assuming responsibility for more and more regions of its life.

Foucault's account of power has radical implications for political theory and practice. In particular, it undermines any 'totalizing theory' which, like Marxism, seeks to unify the diversity of social and historical events within a single explanatory framework. To theorize the complex field of relations of power as an organized totality is a strategy which, even in the hands of critical intellectuals or socialist militants, inevitably contributes to the reproduction of domination. As the experience of bureaucratic state socialism demonstrates, rulers can appeal to totalizing theories in order to legitimate their authority or to exercise power more effectively. Foucault, in conversation with his colleague Gilles Deleuze, suggests a less authoritarian role for theory.⁸³ Just as relations of power are complex and dispersed, so resistance should be multi-centred and diverse. The multiplicity of power relations incites a multifarious resistance to instances of power, which can nonetheless be conceived as interconnected or as a network. In Sheridan's words,

Because 'power' is multiple and ubiquitous, the struggle against it must be localized. Equally, however, because it is a network and not a collection of isolated points, each localized struggle induces effects on the entire network. Struggle cannot be totalized – a single, centralized, hierarchized organisation setting out to seize a single, centralized, hierarchized power; but it can be *serial*, that is, in terms of *horizontal* links between one point of struggle and another.⁸⁴

Similarly, social and political theory should be a 'local and regional practice'. Rather than a single 'master' theory, there should be a plurality of theories engaging with power at different points and to different ends. The role of the intellectual is also different:

The intellectual's role is no longer to place himself 'somewhat ahead and to the side' in order to express the stifled truth of the collectivity; rather it is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object

and instrument in the sphere of 'knowledge', 'truth', 'consciousness', and 'discourse'.⁸⁵

Intellectuals should not put themselves forward as representatives of the people or vanguard of the proletariat. They should avoid 'the indignity of speaking for others'.⁸⁶ Foucault's recasting of the relationship between theory and practice finds considerable resonance in the politics of contemporary (or sometimes 'new') social movements, with their emphasis on difference, diversity and autonomous organization.⁸⁷

In fact, Foucault's account of the emergence of modern forms of power and governmental rationality has analogies both with Weber's account of the irreversible rationalization of society and with the Frankfurt School's pessimistic narrative of the fateful 'dialectic of Enlightenment'. Although Foucault has acknowledged these similarities, his overriding aim is not so much to invoke 'the progress of rationalization in general' as 'to analyze such a process in several fields'.⁸⁸ His concentration on the actual mechanisms and techniques of power, his emphasis on the individualizing manifestations of pastoral power and suspicion of hermeneutics as complicit in the constitution of subjugated subjects *as* subjects are all distinctive features of his analysis. Foucault's Nietzschean anti-humanism also makes him much more consistently sceptical of the value of rationality than Frankfurt School theorists (particularly, of course, Habermas). As a result Foucault is often accused of promoting a disabling moral relativism or even nihilism. His account of power has been taken to imply 'the equivalence of power with sociality itself', a view that would render resistance to power impossible and, since no alternative to power is imaginable, unnecessary.⁸⁹ On the other hand, Foucault also appeals to the normative force of something close to Habermas's model of idealized dialogue. The distinction between dialogue and polemic, for example, is one on which 'a whole morality is at stake, the morality that concerns the search for the truth and the relation to the other'. In dialogue 'the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion.' The polemicist, on the other hand, 'proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question'.⁹⁰ Certainly, Foucault's Nietzschean suspicion of transcendental guarantees for morality and truth does not mean that he regards all values as redundant or simply equivalent. Undoubtedly, both in theory and in life, Foucault was politically engaged; he was not without moral convictions. Whether Foucault's sceptical assumptions entitled him to those convictions remains controversial.

Derrida's Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics

And philosophy is perhaps the reassurance given against the anguish of being mad at the point of greatest proximity to madness.

Derrida, *Writing and Difference*

Jacques Derrida (1930–), following the structuralist path from meaning to sign, from the subject of speech to the anonymous system of language and beyond, carries anti-humanism to the heart of philosophy and metaphysics. His considerable influence on the philosophical scene dates from the publication of three of his major works in 1967.⁹¹ His work is more exclusively philosophical than Foucault's, although ironically he has had most influence in the field of literary studies, and of all contemporary continental philosophers he is the most reviled within the analytical tradition. This reception is ironic for the further reason that Derrida's deconstruction of western metaphysics is far from being an easy or flippant dismissal. He is unhappy with the humanism of the western philosophical tradition but sees no easy escape from this unhappy condition either.⁹² Derrida can be described as 'poststructuralist', in the sense that 'Post-Structuralism is a critique of Structuralism conducted from within.'⁹³ In effect, Derrida draws out the philosophical implications of a structuralist account of language and meaning, overturning the framework of structuralist assumptions in the process. Where Saussure still regards language and meaning as a relatively stable system of oppositions, Derrida believes that Saussure's account of meaning as a differential system of contrasts fatally undermines any account of representation as simple 'presence' and, as a result, removes all fixity and stability from both language and thought. In other words, the contrast between structuralism and poststructuralism is not one of outright opposition or antagonism.⁹⁴ Poststructuralism develops the implications of structuralist premises about meaning, in order to develop a position which, though recognizably distinct, does not discard those premises altogether.

Derrida's position can be approached initially in terms of his reaction to Husserl. Although he approves of Husserl's philosophical response to the universal pretensions of positivism, he believes that the phenomenological search for essences is mired in the 'logocentrism' of the western philosophical tradition. Logocentrism is the pervasive tendency of western thought to associate truth with the voice or 'the word' (*logos*), which is conceived as the immediate

expression of the self-presence of consciousness. Logocentrism, in Grosz's words, 'seeks beyond signs and representation, the real and the true, the presence of being, of knowing and reality, to the mind – an access to concepts and things in their pure, unmediated form'.⁹⁵ Logocentrism thus also involves a prejudice in favour of 'presence', or what Derrida calls the 'metaphysics of presence'. Husserl's logocentrism is evident in his insistence on the independence of experience, of meanings and the contents of consciousness, from their expression in language. Language is seen simply as a medium for the expression or communication of meanings that are ultimately to be explained in terms of the meaning-giving acts of a subject of consciousness. In other words, pure meanings or 'essences', which correspond to the 'signified' in Saussure's terms, are primary; the sign as 'signifier', as sound or as written inscription, is secondary, the merely derivative and contingent vehicle of thought. Husserl's logocentrism also leads him to privilege the immediacy and presence of the voice or speech as opposed to writing. In other words, it leads him to reproduce another deep prejudice of western thought, which Derrida terms 'phonocentrism'. Phonocentrism regards speech as a more transparent medium of thought or meaning than writing. The voice is closer to the immediacy and self-presence of consciousness. As Habermas puts it, the 'fleeting transparency of the voice promotes the assimilation of the word to the expressed meaning'.⁹⁶ In speech we are not as aware of the gap between the word-as-sound and its meaning, between signifier and signified.

Husserl falls victim to the metaphysics of presence, because he ignores the fundamental and ineliminable role of the signifier in thought. By the same token, Derrida's recognition of the 'quasi-transcendental' role of the signifier is at the heart of his critique and radicalization of Saussure. Derrida's position involves a significant shift in the understanding of the concept of difference, which plays such a central role in Saussure's account of language as a differential system of oppositions. This shift is encapsulated in one of Derrida's best-known neologisms, *différance*, a term subtly but significantly unlike *différence*, the normal French word for difference. In accordance with Derrida's stress on writing as opposed to speech, it is also appropriate that, though the two words are written differently, they are pronounced identically in French. The notion of *différance* is specifically designed to disrupt the metaphysics of presence. It does so by reminding us that the recognition of sameness and difference involved in all acts of representation cannot itself be temporally present. Representation is never sheer presence or immediacy, since it always involves both the recognition of 'difference' and a temporal

'deferral'. Here Derrida relies on the fact that in French '*différer*' means both 'to differ' and 'to defer'. On this point at least, Habermas's reading is helpful:

The experience that is present 'at the moment' is indebted to an act of representation, perception is indebted to a reproducing recognition, such that the difference of a temporal interval and thus also an element of otherness is inherent in the spontaneity of the living moment . . .

. . . at the very source of this apparently absolute presence, a temporal difference and otherness looms on the horizon, which Derrida characterizes both as a *passive difference* and as a *deferral that produces difference*.⁹⁷

Derrida's argument here is a direct consequence of the structuralist account of meaning as difference. As Sturrock puts it, 'Every sign contains . . . a "trace" of signs other than itself', and this implies that 'there can be no escape from time in the process of signification'.⁹⁸

Derrida sees the difference and deferral of *différance* as fundamental to all thought and representation. It is in this sense that it has a 'quasi-transcendental' role, since it 'refers' to the condition of conceptual thought as such. *Différance* produces the differences, without which neither thought nor language would be conceivable. Still, Derrida is at pains to deny *différance* any substantial existence as metaphysical 'origin':

What is written as *différance*, then, will be the playing movement that 'produces' – by means of something that is not simply an activity – these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the *différance* that produces differences is somehow before them, in a simply and unmodified – in-different – present. *Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name 'origin' no longer suits it.⁹⁹

In contrast to Saussure's apparently static system of differential oppositions, *différance* is therefore intrinsically temporal and dynamic. This feature of *différance* reflects a more general contrast between the dynamic categories of Derrida's poststructuralism and the static oppositions of structuralism: 'Post-Structuralism differs from Structuralism in being a philosophy of Becoming rather than of Being: it is endlessly dynamic, allowing us no escape or apparent respite from the shifting play of meanings'.¹⁰⁰ Derrida's account of representation also helps to show more clearly, what is wrong with the metaphysics of presence. Sturrock's explanation here is worth quoting at some length:

The 'metaphysics of presence' presumes that whatever is present to us is wholly and immediately so, grasped in an act of pure intuition which has no

recourse to signs. Presence precedes signification. If this were the case, however, it is hard to see how we could be conscious of it, since consciousness *does* have recourse to signs. Presence, according to Derrida, can never be immediate therefore, only mediated by language. We are conscious of what is present to us as *being* present; and the concept of presence, like all concepts, is not a self-enclosed unity, but one inhabited by its contrary. There can be no meaning to asserting that something is 'present' if there is no possibility of its being 'not-present': the concept of presence entails that of non-presence or absence, for such is the fundamentally differential nature of language.¹⁰¹

In other words, Derrida insists on 'the indissoluble interweave of the intelligible with the sign-substrate of its expression', the 'transcendental primacy of the sign as against the meaning'.¹⁰² But in order to provide an even stronger intellectual bulwark against the metaphysics of presence, Derrida seeks to establish writing rather than speech as the best model for an understanding of language and meaning. In contrast to phonocentrism, which privileges the voice and the spoken word, writing makes it obvious that meaning need not, indeed cannot, be guaranteed by the 'living presence' of the subject. Writing makes manifest the fact that meaning is only generated by *différance* or, in other words, the temporally extended system of oppositions between signifiers. This is because, in comparison with the deceptive immediacy of speech, 'the written form detaches any given text from the context in which it arose.'¹⁰³ We are not tempted to attribute meaning to presence, because in the case of writing the author is normally absent. The exemplary status that Derrida assigns to writing as opposed to speech also reinforces the contrast between his own approach and that of Saussure. Derrida locates the symptom of Saussure's failure to recognize the implications of his own theories in his tendency, despite his structuralist account of meaning as a differential system of signs, to lapse into the phonocentric prejudice of western metaphysics. Saussure still assumes that there is a 'natural bond', 'the only true bond', between sound and sense and refers to writing as a secondary and potentially dangerous activity.¹⁰⁴ The evidence that Saussure's phonocentric prejudices represent a lapse from the logic of his own argument is provided by the fact that he nevertheless frequently resorts to metaphors of writing in order to explain his views of language.

Once we recognize that the meaning of written texts has a life of its own in this way, we are more likely to realize that the same applies to meaning and language as such. Derrida makes this point by describing every use of language, including speech, as an instance of 'writing' in his own more general sense. Significantly, Derrida does not advocate a reverse prioritizing of writing over speech, but rather a revised

account of both as the basis for a more adequate account of language, meaning and representation. Language must be understood as a form of 'writing'. In this spirit Derrida assigns transcendental significance to an originary writing or 'arche-writing' (*arché-écriture*): 'writing is not only an auxiliary means in the service of science – and possibly its object – but first . . . the condition of the possibility of ideal objects and therefore of scientific objectivity.'¹⁰⁵ 'Grammatology' is Derrida's term for a general theory of writing in this special sense. He believes such a theory can provide a less misleading basis for both philosophy and the human sciences. Grammatology is thus Derrida's equivalent for what Saussure envisioned as a general theory of the sign or 'semiology'.¹⁰⁶

In a further series of excursions into the history of philosophy Derrida grapples with a number of earlier incarnations of the logocentric and phonocentric prejudices of the western philosophical tradition. Plato, not surprisingly, is identified as a major source of the 'idea of a pure self-authenticating knowledge'.¹⁰⁷ In Platonic terms knowledge is conceived as something ideal and eternal, something radically opposed to the changeable, corrupted world of everyday reality. Ordinary human experience of the world represents at best a confused reflection of underlying 'Forms' or 'essences', in effect the concepts instantiated in particular experiences. Platonic Forms are eternal, unchanging and ideal. Our nearest approach to pure and absolute truth is through our knowledge of the deductive truths of logic and mathematics. These are truths which, once we have been led to 'remember' them, are self-evident to consciousness and patently independent of the corruptible evidence of the senses. The privileged path to genuine philosophical knowledge is the Socratic dialogue. Only through the 'dialectical' exploration of questions about the nature of justice, truth or beauty, only through the to-and-fro of question and answer which Plato learned from Socrates and set down in his dialogues, can we come to know the ideal Form of these concepts and so make appropriate judgements about the truth, justice or beauty of things.

According to Derrida this association of truth with the ideal, with mind or consciousness rather than the body of the 'material', pervades western philosophical and religious traditions.¹⁰⁸ That Plato's philosophy is an example of the metaphysics of presence becomes clear if we consider more closely his conception of the Socratic dialogue. For Plato, significantly, only those who actually attend the Socratic debates are assured of the appropriate relationship to truth. This is because the power of reason and the word, the power of *logos*,

must be relived by each in turn, by each for herself. The dialogue can only point towards truth; it works as a kind of intellectual midwifery or 'maieutic'.¹⁰⁹ There is no evidence for the truth superior to the conviction and certainty of one's own immediate consciousness, and anything less than the immediate self-presence of truth represents a falling away from its purity and certainty. Thus even the memory of a recent proof or a demonstration is potentially unreliable. For the same reason, Plato is suspicious of writing. In the *Phaedrus* writing is condemned, because it removes the need for the 'active reanimation of knowledge . . . its reproduction in the present' and so encourages loss of memory.¹¹⁰ Writing only appears to be good for memory: 'writing is only apparently good for memory, seemingly able to help it from within, through its own motion, to know what is true. But in truth, writing is essentially bad, external to memory, productive not of science but of belief, not of truth but of appearances.'¹¹¹ Writing is the surrogate science of the sophist. As such, writing threatens the legitimate authority of the teacher, who is the only one qualified to reanimate the truth in the appropriate way. There is thus a parallelism between the relationships of 'father to son, speech to writing'.¹¹² As Norris puts it, 'It is through writing that the *logos* is deflected from its proper, truth-seeking aim and abandoned to a state of hazardous dependence on the vagaries of *unauthorized* transmission.'¹¹³ Writing is a less secure means for the transmission of knowledge, because it releases the truth from the control and supervision of the teacher and so permits misunderstanding and distortion.

But as Derrida's exegesis makes clear, Plato is caught in a seemingly inescapable paradox. Although he denounces writing as a source of error, writing is nevertheless an essential means for the transmission not only of truth in general but even of Plato's particular claims about the dangers of writing. After all, it is Plato who would preserve the dialogues of Socrates in written form. And like Saussure, Plato's arguments for the superiority of speech constantly appeal to metaphors drawn from writing. As Norris puts it:

So speech is represented, not only as the opposite of writing, but as a 'good' kind of writing that is inscribed in the soul by revealed or self-authorized truth. Living memory is that which avoids the bad detour through writing (mere marks on a page), but which is still very often defined by metaphors of engraving, deciphering, inscription and other such textual figures.¹¹⁴

Plato's philosophical discourse (and, Derrida suggests, western philosophical discourse generally) is forced to affirm, albeit indirectly

and metaphorically, the indispensability of writing at the same time as it overtly accords to it a secondary, derivative status. For Derrida this paradox is epitomized in the ambiguity of the Greek word '*pharmakon*', which can mean either 'poison' or 'cure'. The word captures perfectly philosophy's ambiguous relationship to writing, which it is forced to see both as poison and as cure.

Derrida's reading of Plato is one of the clearest examples of what he calls 'deconstruction'. The critical practice of deconstruction relates to the notion of *différance* and is also partly modelled on Heidegger's projected 'destruction' (*Destruktion*) of western metaphysics. A deconstructive reading of a philosophical text is designed to bring into the open the tensions between its logical and rhetorical construction, tensions which reflect the problematic relationship between philosophy and writing. Derrida pays particular attention to the unregarded 'margins' of texts, their images and metaphors, the rhetorical resources they find themselves compelled to exploit – even words that are only 'present in their absence'. Thus although the word '*pharmakos*' (wizard, magician, poisoner), a cognate of *pharmakon*, never actually appears in the dialogue of Plato we have been discussing (and for many, of course, this might be thought a significant objection), for Derrida this word belongs to a 'chain of significations' which 'for all its hiddenness, for all that it might escape Plato's notice, is nevertheless something that passes through certain discoverable *points of presence* that can be seen in the text'.¹¹⁵ The word is present in the sense that its absence is felt. Norris's description of deconstruction is helpful at this point:

deconstruction is the vigilant seeking-out of those 'aporias', blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly *means to say* and what it is nonetheless *constrained to mean*. To 'deconstruct' a piece of writing is therefore to operate a kind of strategic reversal, seizing on precisely those unregarded details (casual metaphors, footnotes, incidental turns of argument) which are always, and necessarily, passed over by interpreters of more orthodox persuasion.¹¹⁶

It is also important to emphasize that deconstruction is not as fixed or predictable as a method. Deconstruction 'in its technical sense refers to a series of tactics and devices rather than a method: strategies to reveal the unarticulated presuppositions on which metaphysical and logocentric texts are based'.¹¹⁷ The overriding aim of deconstruction is to disrupt the metaphysics of presence. Deconstruction is 'a means of carrying out this going beyond being, beyond being as presence, at least'.¹¹⁸

The practice of deconstruction also reflects Derrida's distinctive

hermeneutic. His poststructuralist account of the nature of representation and meaning implies that writing (in all its forms) cannot be referred to the intentions of an author. In fact, texts cannot be tied to any single or univocal source of meaning of any kind. The interpretation of texts depends on a potentially infinite array of possible contexts and interpreters, and so leads to what Derrida describes as 'dissemination', an endless dispersion and multiplication of meanings. Dissemination 'marks an irreducible and *generative* multiplicity'.¹¹⁹ It undermines all fixities of interpretation, proliferates rather than reduces instances of ambiguity. As McCarthy puts it: 'our meaning always escapes any unitary conscious grasp we may have of it, for language, as "writing", inevitably harbors the possibility of an endless "dissemination" of sense, an indefinite multiplicity of recontextualisations and reinterpretations.'¹²⁰ Or as Rorty says, Derrida maintains 'that meaning is a function of context, and that there is no theoretical barrier to an endless sequence of recontextualizations'.¹²¹

However, as Norris is at pains to point out, and despite what some of the literary theorists influenced by Derrida have thought (and despite, too, it must be said, some of Derrida's own less careful statements), this is not equivalent to complete interpretive licence. Derrida's own deconstructive readings of philosophical and literary texts might at times be thought wilfully obscure or even perverse, but they unquestionably also demonstrate considerable rigour and a minute attention to detail. Furthermore, in contrast to those like Foucault and Barthes who have enthusiastically proclaimed the 'death of the author', a deconstructive reading aims to go beyond the author's intentions without leaving them behind altogether. As Derrida remarks in the context of a deconstructive reading of Rousseau, 'His declared intention is not annulled by this but rather inscribed within a system which it no longer dominates'.¹²² Deconstruction cannot simply ignore the apparent meaning of a text: 'When one attempts . . . to pass from an obvious to a latent language, one must first be rigorously sure of the obvious meaning.'¹²³

The difficult practice of deconstruction exemplifies Derrida's refusal to accept any easy solution. He refuses to deny what he sees as the ineradicable tensions inherent in the basic conceptual oppositions of western thought, which always remain 'violent hierarchies'. Typical are the oppositions between mind and body, masculine and feminine, reason and emotion, sameness and difference, self and other, where in each case the first of the pair dominates or is thought superior to the second. Deconstruction targets these hierarchies, but without assuming that the tensions they embody can easily be re-

solved or the hierarchies easily reversed. There can be no easy or absolute break with the fundamental dichotomies of western metaphysics. This explains Derrida's hostility to the Hegelian dialectic, which makes the futile attempt to absorb and neutralize these contradictions in a stable synthesis. In these terms, the interrelated concepts of deconstruction and *différance* embody Derrida's distance from Hegel: 'If there were a definition of *différance*, it would be precisely the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian *relève* wherever it operates.'¹²⁴ Instead deconstruction must embark on an 'interminable analysis', if it is 'to avoid both simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply *residing* within the closed field of those oppositions, thereby confirming it'.¹²⁵ It is also Derrida's insistence on the irresolvable tension of deconstruction that distinguishes his position most clearly from the more Hegelian hermeneutics of Gadamer. Where Gadamer describes a fruitful productivity of interpretation through dialogue, Derrida proposes something more like the unhappy lot of Sisyphus. We are condemned to an endless labour of conceptual disruption without guarantees.¹²⁶

Derrida also associates his projected disruption of the violent hierarchies of western metaphysics with a distinctive political stance. In the end, the refusal of the 'longing for an impossible truth' is politically radical.¹²⁷ Violent conceptual hierarchies correspond to oppressive social relations, and to challenge the former is inevitably to undermine the latter. In McCarthy's words,

deconstruction counteracts the 'politics of language' which conceals practices of exclusion, repression, marginalisation, and assimilation behind the apparent neutrality of 'purely theoretical' discourses. Its effects, however, are not confined to language, but 'touch all the social institutions . . . More generally, it touches everything, quite simply everything.'

Deconstruction bears witness 'to the other of western rationalism'. It counteracts the associated 'repression of the other in nature, in ourselves, in other persons and other peoples . . . (it) speaks on behalf of what does not fit into our schemes and patiently advocates letting the other be in its otherness.'¹²⁸ Certainly, Derrida has espoused a number of radical political causes. He has been involved in the reform of the teaching of philosophy in France. He has written admiringly of Nelson Mandela's role in resisting apartheid. He makes plain both his opposition to neo-colonialism and his support for feminism.¹²⁹

Again, Derrida's approach has influenced a wide range of other theorists. Michael Ryan has recruited the critical resources of decon-

struction for an anti-authoritarian socialism, which is 'worked out, as a texture and not as a punctual instance of power', and for which socialist unity need not imply an organized and potentially authoritarian movement but 'the articulation of a diverse, differentiated plurality'.¹³⁰ But Derrida himself does little to develop a constructive political stance. Indeed, it is difficult to see how he could do so, without abandoning his entrenched resistance to systematic theorizing. His bold claim, that 'all of our political codes and terminologies still remain fundamentally metaphysical', seems to leave little space for anything but the most abstractly intellectual political engagement, or alternatively, political commitments without intellectual motivation.¹³¹ Even Derrida's overtly political comments tend to be undercut by irony. On McCarthy's analysis at least, Derrida prefers to avoid the perspective of the participant in social life, who is forced to adopt a position and assume certain values, ending up instead with a stance that is ultimately conservative.¹³²

Overall, Derrida does not abandon the Enlightenment project altogether (something he regards as impossible anyway), but rather seeks to occupy a critical and, by all accounts, difficult position within and against it:

Derrida . . . insists that there is no opting out of that post-Kantian enlightenment tradition, and certainly no question of our now having emerged into a post-modern era where its concepts and categories lack all critical force. On the contrary: it is only by working persistently *within* that tradition, but *against* some of its ruling ideas, that thought can muster the resistance required for an effective critique of existing institutions.¹³³

In fact, Derrida's nuanced relationship to western metaphysics and rationality is already signalled in his early reaction to Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. Derrida sees Foucault's attempt to express a truth beyond a divisive and exclusionary western reason as precisely the 'maddest aspect' of his project. In Norris's words, 'thought is self-deluded if it tries to achieve a standpoint "outside" or "above" the very discourse of philosophical reason.'¹³⁴ This view of Derrida, as at heart a 'transcendental philosopher' with an unhappy conscience, is consistent both with his explicitly philosophical interests and the strong influence of Nietzsche and the later Heidegger.¹³⁵ Certainly, if Derrida retains a commitment to western rationality, it is by no means an easy or complacent one, involving endless critical labour, an interminable work of deconstructive analysis. In the end, the difficulty of Derrida's position reflects his view of philosophy as a series of impossible attempts to say the unsayable. Philosophers grap-

ple with a truth that cannot be expressed within the received order of reason, only to fall back into forgetfulness and complacency, as they develop a newly authoritative truth, itself destined to become the focus of subsequent philosophical revolt. For 'philosophy is perhaps the reassurance given against the anguish of being mad at the point of greatest proximity to madness.'¹³⁶