

Fundamental Theories Relevant to Identity Formation

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アイデンティティー形成に関する諸理論

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Introduction

“I only have one language; it is not mine.”

Or rather, and better still:

I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me. The monolingualism in which I draw my very breath is, for me, my element. Not a natural element, not the transparency of the ether, but an absolute habitat. It is impassable, *indisputable*: I cannot challenge it except by testifying to its omnipresence in me. It would always have preceded me. It is me.

(Derrida: 1998b; 1).

In this passage Jacques Derrida echoes one of the major concerns to have fallen under the gaze of academics since Ferdinand de Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics: the relationship between language and identity. Yet the question lingers (a question as old as the notion of the individual) of what forces act on, and how do they act in, making the individual an individual.

This paper is the first in a series examining the formation of human identity. As the title states, the concern of this first segment will be the concepts that constitute the theoretical underpinnings used for analysis in the ensuing installments. The purpose of this paper then is to provide a reading of Jacques Lacan’s theories of the Symbolic Order and the ‘mirror stage,’ Jacques Derrida’s concepts of *différance* and logocentric systems, and Michel Foucault’s notions on discursive formations and *epistēmēs*, so as to establish their roles as the principle concepts under which the representation of human identity in various cultural constructions (philosophical, literary, artistic, and musical) will be examined. While the aforementioned material will be here treated separately, in order to provide as much depth to their reading as possible under limited parameters, in the entries to follow, they will be applied in conjunction.

Lacan

Utilising the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan “developed a structuralist theory of psychoanalysis” (Rivkin & Ryan: 1997; 123). Of primary importance among Lacan’s theories are the notion of the Symbolic Order and the concept of the “mirror stage.” With the Symbolic Order, Lacan charts the mapping, or matrixing, mechanism acting upon human identity: the sets of cultural constructions that in myriad combinations program human identity. In *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalysis*, Lacan situates the development of the subjective notion of the “I” at between six and eighteen months. This section of the paper will first consider the Symbolic Order so as to reveal the matrixing mechanism; then focus will be placed on the “mirror stage” in order to examine one of the initial stages of identity formation.

In *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud*, Lacan presents his research on the function of language in/on the unconscious. He holds that his work in this area forces a reevaluation of “the notion that the unconscious is merely the seat of the instincts” (Lacan: 1998b; 190). For Lacan, language is a cultural construction, formed and existing outside of the subject, that is matrixed into the subject by her/his involvement/emersion in any particular culture; thus, language must not “be confused with the various psychical and somatic functions that serve it in the speaking subject” (Lacan: 1998b; 190). While language functions in conjunction with the mind and the *sōma*, it is not a production of them, for “language and its structure exist prior to the moment” (Lacan: 1998b; 190) of each subject’s entry into their realm. Although Lacan’s focus here is on language, he emphasises the inter-relationship of language and culture, going so far as to claim that the term culture “could well be reduced to language, or that which essentially distinguishes human society from natural societies” (Lacan: 1998b; 190-191): this leads us then to the notion of the Symbolic Order.

Language as a vehicle for communication, in that its structuring of terms and syntax allow for the transmission of messages, and as the system in/under which both the conscious and the unconscious function is integral in the matrixing process; however, the information language transmits also has a major role in the matrixing process. It is from this then that the Symbolic Order will be viewed as the whole of the myriad cultural constructions, language playing a dual role by being both a cultural construction and the mechanism for the transmission of cultural constructions, that are mapped into the human being; the result of which is the formation of a subjective identity.

The Symbolic Order, language included, is the grouping of all cultural constructions, with the term symbolic here not referring to “icons” or “stylized figurations,” but rather the Saussurean

notion of signifiers: “differential elements, in themselves without meaning, which acquire value only in their mutual relations, and forming a closed order” (Lacan: 1998a; 279). Hence, the Symbolic Order (or *a* Symbolic Order if you will since there are various cultures on Earth, each being comprised of various strata which can be identified as being constituted of similar and dissimilar elements, thus forming myriad Symbolic Order sets through-out the whole of human cultures) is a set of all the aspects that comprise what can be termed a cultural group. For the subjects populating these groups, “it is the symbolic ... that is seen to be the determining” factor; thus, from Lacan’s point, the subjective identity is “an effect of the symbolic” (Lacan: 1998a; 279).

The Symbolic Order imparts the language, customs, concepts, and “truths” upon which identity is founded:

Before language assigns us an “I,” we possess no sense of self. It is language that gives us identity (while simultaneously taking it away in the sense of something pre-given or internal). The unified self posited by object relations theory is an illusion. The child begins as fragmented drives, percepts, and attachments that eventually congeal into an imaginary identity at the “mirror stage” of development. (Rivkin & Ryan: 1997; 123)

Thus, the Symbolic Order is the realm of culture, of language, of signifiers from which the human entity emerges as an individualised “I.” The self, the “I,” exists. It is assembled within, but the various aspects comprising the “whole” are implanted by the Symbolic Order.

A principle, if not the principle, point of this matrixing process is what Lacan termed the “mirror stage.” At the beginning of *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* Lacan states that he believed the “conception of the mirror stage” brought a new view “on the formation of the I” (Lacan: 1998c; 178). Lacan stressed that this new view brought about opposition to “any philosophy directly issuing from the *Cogito*” (Lacan: 1998c; 178). The Post-industrial, or Late-capitalist, concept of the Self, which has roots in Cartesian concepts, is a self-actualizing philosophy issuing from *Cogito*. The following is a brief examination of Lacanian theories related to the formation of the “I.”

Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage” stems from a comparative psychology study that illuminated “a feature of human behaviour” (Lacan: 1998c; 178). The study compared the actions of the human infant to that of the chimpanzee - at a stage where the chimpanzee can outperform the human “in instrumental intelligence” (Lacan: 1998c; 178), six to eighteen months - when placed in front of a mirror. Although the child is “outdone by the chimpanzee” (Lacan: 1998c; 178), the child can recognize its own image in the mirror. “Once the image has been mastered and found empty” (Lacan: 1998c; 178) the chimpanzee loses interest in the image in the mirror.

However, Lacan observed that the child at this stage begins:

a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates - the child's own body, and the persons and things around him (Lacan: 1998c; 178).

Lacan postulates that these actions, "gestures," indicate the creation of an image of unified complete subjectivity, a non-fragmented Self or "I." This image of a complete "I" becomes the human ego and remains unaware of its construction through "imaginary percepts and narcissistic fantasies" (Rivkin & Ryan: 1998; 123). The "mirror stage" is understood then "as an *identification*" (Lacan: 1998c; 179): this meaning the "transformation" that a person undergoes when assuming an image. The infant transforms from a fragmented state (brought about by its separation from the mother's body) with no sense of Self, to an image of completeness in itself and disconnectedness from the world: an image of subjectivity. Lacan explained that "this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone" (Lacan: 1998c; 179).

The "mirror stage" marks the formation of a fictional image of the Self as whole and indissoluble. This image of the Self is given to the person by "the social languages" (the Symbolic Order) of the person's particular culture. The symbols of this order "are not icons . . . but signifiers" (Lacan: 1998a; 279) in the Saussurian sense. They are elements depending on differences to give them meaning and "acquire value only in their mutual relations" (Lacan: 1998a; 279). The fictional image of the Self is, thus, constituted within an atmosphere of conflict. The image of a complete Self, "in the Cartesian, Hobbesian, and Lockean traditions" the notion of consciousness, or Self, being "like a bubble or an enclosed cabinet; the mind . . . in a box" (Sokolowski: 2000; 9), which the subject believes has always existed, as a purely internal element of the Self, is given to the subject by external factors, and is itself "an effect of the symbolic" (Lacan: 1998a; 279).

If identity is given from the outside, then the Cartesian concept of the Self, with its focus on a completely subjective sense of identity, as exemplified by Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore, I am), must be called to question. Descartes' position neglects to consider that the process of thought is produced and operates under systems which are formed external to the "I." This philosophy which promotes an indissoluble complete Self, based on *Cogito*, polarizes the image of the Self formed in the "mirror stage" with that of the world outside the person. This polarization can be seen to manifest itself in the binary opposition subjectivity/objectivity. In this binary oppositional set, subjectivity acts as identity, the irreducible Self, and objectivity as that

which is external to the Self. When viewed under the concepts of Jacques Derrida's *différance*, the polarized representation of the subjective/objective binary is replaced with an ever-fluctuating relationship between the subjective and the objective order. In *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault, in considering the interplay between *cogito* and 'unthought,' writes that:

Man is a mode of being which accommodates that dimension - always open, never finally delimited, yet constantly traversed - which extends from a part of himself not reflected in a *cogito* to the act of thought by which he apprehends that part; and which, in the inverse direction, extends from that pure apprehension to the empirical clutter, the chaotic accumulation of contents, the weight of experiences constantly eluding themselves, the whole silent horizon of what is posited in the sandy stretches of non-thought (Foucault: 1997a; 322-323).

The individual is never fully aware of either their own inner workings or the workings of forces external to them. Chaotically accumulated objective forces become internalized subjective forces. These subjective forces in turn affect the "apprehension" of the external. This sets up a relationship that follows the precepts of Derridian *différance* where "the one is only the other deferred" (Derrida: 1998a; 399).

Derrida

In his essay *Différance*, (first published in the *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, LXII, No. 3, July-September, 1968), Jacques Derrida postulates that "The verb "to differ" [*différer*] seems to differ from itself" (Derrida: 1998a; 385). He begins the essay by stating that the verb "to differ" on the one hand "indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility" (Derrida: 1998a; 385). Derrida then argues that it also "expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a *spacing* and *temporalizing* that puts off until "later" what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible" (Derrida: 1998a; 385). Derrida's point here is that the French verb *différer* corresponds to both the *different* and the *deferred*. According to Derrida, *différer* "signifies nonidentity" in one case while in the other "it signifies the order of the *same*" (Derrida: 1998a; 385). Derrida then considers that "there must be a common, although entirely different [*différente*], root within the sphere that relates the two movements of differing to one another" (Derrida: 1998a; 385). Derrida gives to this situation of a "*sameness*" that is not "*identical*," the term *différance*.

In defining *différance* Derrida writes that it "refers to what in classical language would be called the origin or production of differences and the differences between differences, the *play* [*jeu*] of differences" (Derrida: 1998a; 385). This "*play* [*jeu*] of differences" is the mutual dependence of the differences in constituting and defining each other. In explaining the functioning of *différance*, Derrida refers to the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure:

It was Saussure who first of all set forth the *arbitrariness of signs* and the *differential character* of signs as principles of general semiology and particularly of linguistics.

tics. And, as we know, these two themes – the arbitrary and the differential – are in his view inseparable. Arbitrariness can occur only because the system of signs is constituted by the differences between the terms, and not by their fullness. The elements of signification function not by virtue of the compact force of their cores but by the network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to one another. “Arbitrary and differential” says Saussure “are two correlative qualities.” (Derrida: 1998a; 392).

Within a system of language then, signs are attributed meaning through their differing from the other signs within the closed system. One term is differentiated from another. It is through this differentiation that the meanings of terms are distinguished and not by any “compact force” inherent within their core. Saussure’s concept of the functioning of the “arbitrary and differential” in linguistics can also be applied to other systems. Derrida does this with his consideration of the functioning of *différance* in philosophical discourse.

Derrida marks Nietzschean thought as “a critique of philosophy as active indifference to difference” (Derrida: 1998a; 397). He sees Nietzsche’s work as identifying in philosophy “evasions and ruses of anything disguised in its [*différance*]” (Derrida: 1998a; 398). Derrida holds that what Nietzsche diagnosed as problematic within philosophy was the substitution of “the disclosure of truth” with “an incessant deciphering” (Derrida: 1998a; 398). The result is that the system of philosophy becomes one dominated by ciphers rather than one based on truth, “which only then becomes a function that is understood, inscribed, and circumscribed” (Derrida: 1998a; 398); it is not a system based on ‘absolutes’ (here the term ‘absolute’ refers to cultural constructions that are assumed to be ‘natural’ or immutable), but rather a system of codes that are held to be ‘absolute.’ Operating on this Nietzschean system of logic, Derrida postulates the following:

. . . that philosophy lives *in* and *from* [*différance*], that it thereby blinds itself to the *same*, which is not the identical. The same is precisely [*différance*] (with an *a*), as the diverted and equivocal passage from one difference to another, from one term of the opposition to the other. We could thus take up all the coupled oppositions on which philosophy is constructed, and from which our language lives, not in order to see opposition vanish but to see the emergence of a necessity such that one of the terms appears as the [*différance*] of the other, the other as “differed” within the systematic ordering of the same (Derrida: 1998a; 398).

Applying this concept of *différance* will then reveal that the term ‘good’ derives its meaning from its position within a binary oppositional set in relation to the term ‘bad.’ Neither the meaning of the term ‘good’ nor the meaning of the term ‘bad’ is based on any inherent ‘absolute’ existing solely within the core of the terms. Both terms only exist through their mutual relationship. It is *différance*, the ‘play’ between the two terms that constitutes them. Neither of the terms can derive meaning outside their interplay as binary opposites.

Moreover, at the beginning of his discussion on *différance*, Jacques Derrida positions *différance* as “neither a word nor a concept” (Derrida: 1982; 3). Derrida prefers the term *sheaf* to mark *différance*, for its appealing connotation of an “assemblage” with a “complex structure” of

“weaving” and “interlacing;” where the “different threads and different lines of meaning” are afforded the flexibility to take various paths at the moment they are prepared to be wound together (Derrida: 1982; 3). In comprehending *différance* as a *sheaf* rather than as a word or as a concept, Derrida is attempting to keep *différance* free from the snare of logocentrism: this is vital, for it allows Derrida to utilise the *sheaf of différence* in his deconstruction of logocentric systems. By eluding a logocentric system of analysis, Derridian *différance* will lie beyond the trap of *presence*. This is *presence* in the Heideggerian sense of the term: “an extra-systemic validating . . . centre” underwriting and fixing meaning while remaining above “scrutiny” (Hawthorn: 1998; 125-126).

Primary to this attempt to operate outside of a logocentric system is the deconstruction of the opposition between sensible and intelligible, “one of the founding oppositions” of traditional philosophical discourse, which Derrida achieves by replacing the [e] of difference with the [a] of *Différance*. Thus, *Différance* resists this “founding” binary opposition, as it does all oppositions, “because it transports it” (Derrida: 1982; 5). The sensible, which is perceived through the senses, can only be comprehended or understood in the intelligible; yet without the sensible, without those things that would be sensed, the intelligible could not exist. The sensible and the intelligible are not polemical concepts, for they rely on *différance*’s “play.” It is what Derrida has termed “the concept of *play*” that keeps *différance* beyond oppositions. *Différance*, through its *play*, generates the differences of oppositional relationships. However, in so doing, it is not an “origin” in the logocentric sense: *différance* is not a signified. The following quote from *Différance* works well in clearly illustrating *différance*, *play* and “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 simple 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 (Derrida: 1982; 11).

Différance should then be held as being “the movement according to which . . . any system of referral” is “historically” generated by woven differences (Derrida: 1982; 12). The systems of Post-industrialism, which are based on oppositions, upon differences, “are “produced” - deferred - by *différance*” (Derrida: 1982; 14). *Différance* is a *sheaf* that does not tolerate “the opposition of activity and passivity, nor that of cause and effect, or of indetermination and determination:” it is a *sheaf* where oppositional logic disintegrates leaving only *play* (Derrida: 1982; 16-17); it is a *sheaf* that when applied to the signifiers and transcendental signifieds of logocentric systems, deconstructs them revealing the hollowness of the centre, or in Heideggerian terms, the *Grund*.

A, if not *the*, fundamental logocentric system, the system through which all discourse occurs is Language. Thus, language must be considered as a system of signifiers, which has as its governing centre the word. The concept of a logocentric system is modelled in Of Grammatology

by Derrida in his discussion of the necessary relation between the signifier and the signified. The logocentric system is structured with a transcendental signified as its controlling centre. All signifiers of the system must refer back to the transcendental signified. However, the transcendental signified must remain “irreducible to all the epochal determinations that it nonetheless makes possible” (Derrida: 1997a; 20). As the defining controlling centre of the system, the transcendental signified must hold the characteristics of being “absolute and irreducible” as well as “producing itself spontaneously” (Derrida: 1997a; 20). Applying this to the word, it takes on the characteristics of being self-generating, “absolute and irreducible.” The word is the central primary element of a language system. The word is the logos of the logocentric system. The word creates that which is seen by those operating in the system. Nothing can be seen within the system, which does not make itself seen through the word. Martin Heidegger argues this point in Being and Time: “*Logos* lets something be seen (*phainesthai*), namely what is being talked about, and indeed *for* the speaker (who serves as the medium) or for those who speak with each other. Speech “lets us see,” from itself, *apo* . . . , what is being talked about” (Heidegger: 1996; 28): here the interplay, *différance*, between the sensible and the intelligible is evident. The relationship between the spoken and what is spoken about that Heidegger is examining in this passage can be seen as similar to the relationship between the signifier and the transcendental signified that Derrida outlined: there is a linking between the two such that one cannot exist without the other: a linking that generates logocentric systems.

Derrida’s discussion in Of Grammatology charts the constitution of a transcendental signified. The transcendental signified functions from a position of precomprehension: all “determined significations,” lexicons and syntax, “and therefore . . . all linguistic signifiers” imply it (Derrida: 1997a; 20). While it is not “identified” with any particular signifier, it is “present” within each. “Present” because the signified’s “formal essence” is *presence*. This concept, the “truth” of *presence* as the essence of the signified, is what Derrida identifies as the organizing structure of “Western tradition.”

The reassuring evidence within which Western tradition had to organize itself and must continue to live would . . . be as follows: the order of the signified is never contemporary, is at best the subtly discrepant inverse or parallel - discrepant by the time of a breath - from the order of the signifier. And the sign must be the unity of a heterogeneity, since the signified (sense or thing, noeme or reality) is not in itself a signifier, a *trace*: in any case is not constituted in its sense by its relationship with a possible trace. The formal essence of the signified is *presence*, and the privilege of its proximity to the logos as *phonè* is the privilege of presence. . . . The “formal essence” of the sign can only be determined in terms of presence (Derrida: 1997a; 18).

Since the “signified . . . is not in itself a signifier” then it must exist through itself. That is, it produces “itself spontaneously, from within the self” (Derrida: 1997a; 20). The signified can thus

be seen as an ideal or universal. From this, it can be posited that the signified is then transcendental in the Middle Ages sense of “*Primum Cognitum*,” first thought (Derrida: 1997a; 20). It is thus constituted as irrefutable or as Derrida explains, “irreducible to all the epochal determinations that it . . . makes possible” (Derrida: 1997a; 20). The transcendental signified is the *primum cognitum* of the system, the first thought of it, and thus the determining and governing agent of the system. From this centralised controlling position it brings about “the history of the logos” (Derrida: 1997a; 20) and logocentric systems.

When examining logocentric systems, attention must also be given to Derrida’s *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*. The concepts discussed within the essay reveal how the centre upon which a structure is formed, organized, and governed is arbitrarily attributed its position as a transcendental signified. Moreover, the centre only exists through its interplay and relation to the logocentric structure. This is a relationship which operates along the premises that Derrida established in *Différance*. In the essay, Derrida considers “the structurality of structure” (Derrida: 1997b; 278). By this is meant the manner in which logocentric structures or systems are organized and governed through a centred transcendental signified. Derrida claims that structure, “as old as Western science and Western philosophy” escaped scrutiny until “a *rupture* and a redoubling” occurred (Derrida: 1997b; 278). This *rupture* was not one single event; moreover, it is still occurring. For how long the “occurring” of this event will last, and what, if any, outcome there will be at the end (if there is indeed ever an end) are completely unfathomable. This is because the “destructive discourses” themselves are caught within the gyre of the “signs” and structures which they are assaulting through their reliance upon language, syntax and lexicon (Derrida: 1997b; 280). As Derrida explains their captivity:

. . . the concept of the sign cannot in itself surpass this opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. The concept of the sign, in each of its aspects, has been determined by this opposition throughout the totality of its history. It has lived only on this opposition and its system. But we cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity, or without the risk of erasing difference in the self-identity of a signified reducing its signifier into itself or, amounting to the same thing, simply expelling its signifier outside itself (Derrida: 1997b; 281).

Even though the destructive forces of the *rupture* are trapped within the language that their critiques are formulated in, Derrida was able to associate the *rupture* with three names: Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger.

Nietzsche contributed his “critique of metaphysics,” replacing being and knowledge (truth) with “concepts of play, interpretation, and sign (sign without present truth) (Derrida: 1997b; 280). Freud’s work brought a questioning of the conscious subject or individual identity to bear on the Cartesian centrally structured Self, *cogito ergo sum*. Heidegger’s destruction of the concept of

Being as *presence*, a distortion in Western philosophy which ignores Being's situation in the "past out of which it emerges and a future towards which it tends" (Sim: 1998; 276), and its relationship to time brought about what many have seen as the "destruction of metaphysics" (Derrida: 1997b; 280). In *Being and Time* Heidegger explains that:

The interpretation of something as something is essentially grounded in fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conceptions. Interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping of something previously given. When the particular concretion of the interpretation in the sense of exact text interpretation likes to appeal to what "is there," what is initially "there" is nothing else than the self-evident, undisputed prejudice of the interpreter, which is necessarily there in each point of departure of the interpretation as what is already "posited" with interpretation as such, that is, pre-given with fore-having, fore-sight, fore-conception (Heidegger: 1996; 141).

The above passage from Heidegger contains the same shadows of a spiralling trap that Derrida acknowledges in *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*. The interpreter in the above is unable to escape from the "fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception[s]" which constitute the presuppositions of the centralised Self. This is the position which both Heidegger and Derrida wish to escape, both conceding that they do not fore-see escape as possible.

Derrida argues that throughout metaphysics centralised structures have existed and can be viewed "as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center" (Derrida: 1997b; 279). While the "forms or names" of the centre shift and change, the structure remains centralised. Derrida explains that from:

the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence - *eidos*, *arche*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth (Derrida: 1997b; 279-280).

From the above analysis it can be determined that, in a logocentric system, the transcendental signified defines the meaning of and establishes the relationships of the elements operating within that system. The transcendental signified, as an ideal or a truth, remains beyond any scrutiny. Derrida's deconstruction of transcendental logocentric structures reveals the inadequacy of such systems. The transcendental signified, *Primum Cognitum*, which is held to spontaneously generate itself from the Self, only has being "through the logos; that is *being* nothing before the logos" (Derrida: 1997a; 20). Here Derrida's concept of *Différance* may be seen in action. The transcendental signified and the logocentric system are set in an oppositional relationship with the transcendental signified as irreducible and self-generating and the system as reducible and generated. An examination of Michel Foucault's concepts on discursive formations and *epistēmēs* will strengthen the premise that a cultural system, or a Symbolic Order, operates in a logocentric manner: discursive formations, generated within and operating through language (a transcendental signified), govern the knowledge set, or "truths," of a closed system of belief, an *epistēmē*.

Foucault

In The Archaeology of Knowledge Michel Foucault defines the term discursive formations as: Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation* . . . (Foucault: 1997b; 38).

A discursive formation then is comprised of a system of rules or conventions that order and structure the manner in which discourse may be conducted in relation to a given field. A useful example of the workings of discursive formations is provided by Foucault in his consideration of the regularity and correlation between the discursive formations associated with the judicial and the medical as he outlined them in The Archaeology of Knowledge, where he presents “various strategic possibilities that permit the activation of incompatible themes;” this linkage is made possible through correlations operating within the discourse. Foucault arrived at this hypothesis during his considerations of the construction of the unity between medicine, economics and grammar. He decided on a course which would describe “dispersions themselves,” and attempted to discover whether “one cannot discern a regularity: an order in their successive appearance, correlations in their simultaneity, assignable positions in a common space, a reciprocal functioning, linked and hierarchized transformations” (Foucault: 1997b; 37).

Foucault identifies four relations between the discursive formation of the judicial and the discursive formation of the medical. The first relation is classified as authority. Foucault postulates that there is a “relation between the authority of medical decision and the authority of judicial decision” (Foucault: 1997b; 44). He holds that this is a complex relation in that the medical acknowledges the absolute “authority of the judiciary to define crime, to determine the circumstances in which it is committed, and the punishment it deserves” while reserving “the right to analyse its origin and to determine the degree of responsibility involved” (Foucault: 1997b; 43-44). The shared yet divided authoritative relationship between the judicial and medical systems is examined by Foucault in Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason and Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, works in which Foucault’s analysis follows the shifts from relative freedom to degrees of confinement, for criminal and/or medical reasons, during a period from the late Middle Ages to Post-French Revolution, and in The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception, where the physician is seen as the mechanism used by the state to observe and note the health of its members.

The second relation discussed by Foucault is the concept of filters that the judicial and the medical devise and utilise through which each will interact with the criminal/ patient. The judicial filter is comprised of interrogation, investigation and police and judicial information. The filter

operating for the medical is “formed by the medical questionnaire, clinical examinations” and accounts of the patient’s personal medical history (Foucault: 1997b; 43-44). Within both the judicial and the medical, the practitioners follow systems of information gathering and processing, systems that are similar in technique.

Foucault’s explanation of the third relation between the two discursive formations considers that the judicial aspect concerns itself with “the family, sexual and penal norms of the behaviour of individuals.” The medical correlation considers a “table of pathological symptoms and diseases,” or what may be termed a corpus of medical knowledge to which the physician may refer. The link between the two is that “the family, sexual and penal norms” are the signs for “the pathological symptoms and diseases” (Foucault: 1997b; 43-44).

The final connection between the two discursive formations is the relation of confinement. Within the judicial discourse “punitive confinement in prison” is operating. Medical confinement occurs within a hospital for the reception of therapeutic measures. Both of these systems of confinement function under criteria aimed at restoring the individual to ‘normalcy’ (Foucault: 1997b; 43-44).

Discursive formations are subject to what Foucault termed “the *rules of formation*.” These *rules of formation* were considered by Foucault to be “conditions of existence,” which not only worked for the “coexistence” and “maintenance” of the system, but also for its “modification” and “disappearance” (Foucault: 1997b; 38). This implies that discursive formations are in continual flux, or change. While the system is one of constant readjustment, often minute enough to go relatively unnoticed, it is still a system whose similarities and dispersions may be mapped. This mapping, within albeit loose parameters, can be utilised to mark-out what Foucault referred to as *epistēmēs*.

In the essay, *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, from which the following passage is taken, Jorge Luis Borges addresses the arbitrariness of classification systems in:

. . . a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance (Borges: 1973; 103).

Borges makes the argument that “all the languages in the world . . . are equally inexpressive” (Borges: 1973; 102). Borges argues his point by noting the “arbitrariness of Wilkins” (1614-1672: rector of an Oxford college and “the first secretary of the Royal Society of London” who undertook the task of organizing “the universe into forty categories or classes”), and “of the unknown (or apocryphal) Chinese encyclopedist” (Borges: 1973; 101-104). In illustrating his position further

Borges reminds the reader of those little mundane discussions, that “we have all suffered through” (Borges: 1973; 101) regarding the expressive dominance of one term or language over another: “the word *luna* is more (or less) expressive than the word *moon*” (Borges: 1973; 102). From such “anacoluthic” debates nothing may be derived. Borges claimed that from such arguments nothing could be deduced because “we do not know what the universe is” (Borges: 1973; 104). Operating from a position of ignorance, imposing order through classifications can only result in systems that are “obviously . . . arbitrary and conjectural” (Borges: 1973; 104).

It was while reading Borges’s essay on Wilkins (the long quote from above in particular), that Michel Foucault emitted “the laughter that shattered . . . all the familiar landmarks” of both his thought and “*our* thought” (Foucault: 1997a; XV). Foucault attributes the aforementioned passage as being the germ from which The Order of Things sprung. He explains that the shattering laughter destroyed “all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things” (Foucault: 1997a; XV). The laughter denotes the beginning of Foucault’s questioning of the systems of thought: the functioning of the mind as a system. Foucault undertook this questioning in the manner of an archaeological examination. In The Order of Things, Foucault investigates “empirical knowledge” in seeking whether or not it possessed, “at a given time and in a given culture, . . . well-defined regularity” (Foucault: 1997a; ix). As Foucault was being lured by “the exotic charm of another system of thought” (Foucault: 1997a; XV), he became aware of “the limitation of our own” system of thought. Foucault realized “the stark impossibility of thinking *that*” (Foucault: 1997a; XV). He entered a stage where black and white merge into grey, where one wonders “what is it impossible to think,” where the “collapse” of the “age-old distinction between the Same and the Other” (Foucault: 1997a; XV) threatens to undermine all that has been designated as knowledge.

Foucault is not proposing the abandonment of *his* system of thought and replacing it with “the exotic . . . system of thought.” This is made clear in The Archaeology of Knowledge, where Foucault’s development of his method for examining regularities and dispersions resulted in the concept of discursive formations: it may be considered here that it is discursive formations that constitute the “well-defined regularity.” This “well-defined regularity” can be held to be a system: the system of any individual *epistēmē*, or the Symbolic Order of any given individual. With the theory of the *epistēmē*, Foucault posits that throughout history, the governing discursive formations, and the bodies of knowledge to which they are woven, do not remain constant. They are ever changing, mutable, always changing to new systems of knowledge and thought. He is not advocating the replacement of one *epistēmē* with another, for he is well aware that one is as “true,”

or “absolute” as the next. Foucault adapts the term *epistēmē* from the Greek term for knowledge and defines it as follows:

By *episteme*, we mean, in fact, the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems; the way in which, in each of these discursive formations, the transitions to epistemologization, scientificity, and formalization are situated and operate; the distribution of these thresholds, which may coincide, be subordinated to one another, or be separated by shifts in time; the lateral relations that may exist between epistemological figures or sciences in so far as they belong to neighbouring, but distant, discursive practices. The episteme is not a form of knowledge (*connaissance*) or type of rationality which, crossing the boundaries of the most varied sciences, manifests the sovereign unity of a subject, a spirit, or a period; it is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities (Foucault: 1997b; 191).

Foucault’s work can be seen as an “analysis of the *episteme*” (Foucault: 1997b; 191). He looked for neither continuity between periods nor connections between dissimilar events in an attempt to reveal a “stable . . . linear” succession throughout time (Foucault: 1997b; 3). Foucault instead focused on “the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity,” on differences (Foucault: 1997b; 4). Following his concept, the *epistēmē* can be seen as a period (a period may be situated upon axes temporally and/or spatially) where the foundations for all subdivisions of knowledge are comprised of the same “norms and postulates” (Foucault: 1997b; 191). It is a segment, or section, or moment of time in which the inhabitants of that “particular period” are governed and held sway over by “a certain structure of thought” (Foucault: 1997b; 191). These rules governing the “structure of thought” can be held to be what Foucault called discursive formations. At this point it is sufficient to consider a discursive formation as being formed by a system of rules, conventions, or “absolutes” which structure and order the way in which discourse on a particular subject occurs. It is in The Order of Things that Foucault raises the important question of “what is it impossible to think” (Foucault: 1997a; xv). This underlying thought resulted in the realization that between systems of thought there are both similarities and differences; however, these similarities and differences are not necessarily grounded on any “natural” condition or “absolute” truths. From this realization Foucault in The Archaeology of Knowledge turned to an examination of the dispersions and similarities throughout history to expose that they are not “stable,” that the seeking of “linear successions . . . [has] given way to discoveries in depth” (Foucault: 1997b; 3).

In the Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault stated that in the nineteenth century the “first phase” of an “epistemological mutation of history” began (Foucault: 1997b; 11). Foucault believed this mutation to be still occurring at the time of his writing The Archaeology of Knowledge. It is Marx, according to Foucault, who marks the beginning of this “first phase.”

However, the transformation sparked by Marx “has been neither registered nor reflected upon” (Foucault: 1997b; 12). Foucault attributes the ignoring of the mutations initiated by Marx as being the result of the fear of losing “the sovereignty of the subject” (Foucault: 1997b; 12).

The subject, or Self, must be defended against “discontinuity.” Foucault argues that “the history of thought” in Western culture has been constructed in the form “of uninterrupted continuities,” forging “connexions that no analysis could undo without abstraction” (Foucault: 1997b; 12). This occurs because there is a certain reassurance in “the identical,” while conceptions of difference, and descriptions of “separations and dispersions” emit an air of “repugnance” (Foucault: 1997b; 12). The construction of histories was formed along these parameters because “we were afraid to conceive of the *Other* in the time of our own thought” (Foucault: 1997b; 12). A “Continuous history” proves to be “indispensable” in grounding the subject since it dismisses dispersals and reconstitutes “unity . . . in the form of historical consciousness” (Foucault: 1997b; 12). Within this systematised cocoon lies the “privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness:” the subject, the Self (Foucault: 1997b; 12).

Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* presents such a system. According to Roy Porter’s summary, Burckhardt’s work:

acclaimed Renaissance Italy as the time and place when mankind - by which was implicitly meant literate, gifted elite males - began to liberate itself from the chains of custom, conformity and the Church, taking a fearless leap forward into self-discovery and self-fulfilment (Porter: 1997; 3).

Porter in Rewriting the Self and Margreta De Grazia in Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture both argue that “the story of the self” has been told in “a standard way” (Porter: 1997; 1) by historians such as Burckhardt in order to present a clean linear theory. This theory states that humans have progressed from primitive beginnings of “tribal mentality” where “all thought-processes were collective and all activities communal” (Porter: 1997; 2), to the Renaissance and “the Early Modern” (De Grazia: 1996; 5) where the individual stands as a unique Self. Burckhardt’s writing of history works to counter the “epistemological mutation of history” (Foucault: 1997b; 11). This mutation manifests itself in the “decentring” works produced by Marx, “the decentring” aspect of “Nietzschean genealogy,” and the Freudian “decentred . . . subject in relation to the laws of his desire, the forms of his language, the rules of his action, or the games of his mythical or fabulous discourse”(Foucault: 1997b; 13). The research undertaken in the nineteenth century in the fields of “psychoanalysis, linguistics, and ethnology” assaulted and decentred the Self (Foucault: 1997b; 13). It questioned the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum*, and with this the precepts of all the human sciences came under scrutiny, for “the human sciences did not appear”

until “man constituted himself in Western culture as both that which must be conceived of and that which is to be known” (Foucault: 1997a; 345).

In the formation and maintenance of identity the subjective and the objective cannot function independently. They cannot be polarized. The Self cannot exist without the Other to affirm its existence. The maintenance of identity is dependent on the interplay between Self and Other. A literary example of the maintenance of identity through interdependence with the other can be seen in Samuel Beckett’s play Happy Days through an analysis of the relation between Willie and Winnie.

Willie may not hear much of what Winnie says and answers to even less of her chatter, but his presence and limited response give her solace. The idea that some of what she is saying is being heard reinforces her own sense of existence:

Ah yes, if only I could bear to be alone, I mean prattle away with not a soul to hear. [Pause.] Not that I flatter myself you hear much, no Willie, God forbid. [Pause.] Days perhaps when you hear nothing. [Pause.] But days too when you answer. [Pause.] So that I may say at all times, even when you do not answer and perhaps hear nothing, something of this is being heard, I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing I could never bear to do - for any length of time (Beckett: 1990; 145).

Without Willie, Winnie could not be sure of her existence. Beckett’s concept of identity or the Self refute Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum*, a concept that promotes the self-actualization of the subject. The writing of Beckett under examination here can be seen as proposing that the maintenance of the Self is dependent on its interaction with the Other. Derrida’s theory of *différance* can be witnessed functioning in this proposal. Identity, or the Self is inextricably entwined with the Other. Absence of the Other will lead to absence of the Self. Self differs from Other yet is only relevant, or in existence, because of this differing. Moreover, it can be argued that the formation of Self is based on a position of differing from Other. The subjective Self is formed during the “mirror stage” when it distinguishes itself from the Other, the objective. If this distinction cannot be made, the identity that sees itself as differing from all things operating outside of itself (the objective), cannot be formed. The Self can be then held as being formed and maintained through the functioning of the Derridian *sheaf of différance*.

Conclusion

In *Différance* Jacques Derrida quotes the following passage from Ferdinand de Saussure: “language . . . is not a function of the speaking subject” (Derrida: 1998a; 396). Derrida reasons that the implication of this statement is “that the subject (self-identical or even conscious of self-identity, self-conscious) is inscribed in the language, that he is a “function” of the language”

(Derrida: 1998a; 396). From this it can then be suggested that the subjective aspects of any given individual are derived from objective forces, or cultural constructions. In Lacanian terminology this would be the formation of the Self by the Symbolic Order. Working from this theory it becomes impossible to polarize subjectivity and objectivity. The two are intertwined as correlative aspects which form one element. Levels of subjectivity and objectivity constantly fluctuate depending on varying stimuli both internal and external to the individual. This interplay is *différance* in action and can be held to be what has been termed identity. The objective forces that act in the construction of a Self are constantly varying. They are rarely, if ever, precisely the same for any two individuals. In a broader sense, however, the Symbolic Order of any age, culture, class, region or race can be seen to also contain many consistencies. Catherine Belsey working under "the assumption that meanings are first learned, rather than experienced or felt," concludes that limits as to "what can be said and understood" during any given period are delineated by "the meanings in circulation" during that particular period (Belsey: 1985; 5). This can be read as an echo, inverted in how it is stated, but not in the meaning of the statement, of Foucault's "What is it impossible to think." Moreover, Belsey's concept of a "particular period" with a "total set of relations that unite . . . the discursive practices" (Foucault: 1997b; 191) holds with Foucault's concept of an *epistémè*.

Thus, it is proposed that the subject is formed by the Symbolic Order or the *epistémè* to which the person belongs. The Symbolic Order is comprised of "the world of culture, of language, and in particular the world of signifiers. It is the realm of culture in which the human subject comes into existence" (Sim: 1998; 301). The Symbolic Order, through its mapping of the mind, operates as a foundation on which identity is constructed. As the foundation varies from *epistémè* to *epistémè*, one may conclude that rather than being "absolute," the cultural truths and languages from which the foundation is constructed may be seen as a myth. Following this pattern of deconstruction, Ernesto Laclau in *Politics and the Limits of Modernity* proposes that:

The collapse of the myth of foundations deprives History and society of an ultimate meaning, of an absolute point of departure for political reasoning in the sense of a Cartesian *cogito*. In classical ontological terms, this means that the social is groundless; if we accept the relational character of all identity, the ideal conditions of closure for a system are never achieved and therefore all identity is more or less a floating signifier (Laclau: 1999; 340).

With identity being "more or less a floating signifier," it is evident that identity is constructed based on the premise that "The Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject" (Lacan: 1998b; 203). The Self, the identity of each individual, is defined and constructed through and by its *différance* with the Other, with the Symbolic Order, with the external cultural constructions of the *epistémè*.

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