

## JACQUES DERRIDA: A RHETORIC THAT DECONSTRUCTS COMMON SENSE

### RHETORIC AND COMMON SENSE

As Perelman suggests, rhetoric has always been concerned with understanding the basic nature of an audience.<sup>1</sup> Considering this view, the perennial question posed by rhetoric might be: How does one discourse properly with an audience? Using the terminology supplied by Bitzer, this query might be rephrased to read: How does one “uncover and make available the public knowledge needed in our time and give body and voice to the universal public”.<sup>2</sup> Of key importance is that the rhetorician must secure a base of knowledge that will allow communication to commence between a speaker and an audience. If discourse is to be successful a speaker must address an audience in a style that can be understood, and therefore must substantiate all social intercourse on knowledge that

<sup>1</sup> Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1969, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd F. Bitzer “Rhetoric and Public Knowledge”, in *Rhetoric Philosophy, and Literature: An Exploration*, edited by Dom M. Burkes, West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1978, p. 92.

is “public” or held in common. At first this might sound quite pedestrian, yet throughout the history of rhetoric this assumption has proven to be quite problematic.

For instance, the major problem faced by rhetoric has been related to the issue of how the universal or “common” knowledge presupposed by communication might be procured. In Habermasian language, on what basis is “communicative competence” to be successfully guaranteed? Perelman argues that classic rhetoric has traditionally eschewed the ground of *doxa*, or common sense, to be the locus of social discourse. Instead, rhetoric has sought to ensure successful discourse by invoking ethereal values, such as the Good, the True, and Justice, to guide all rhetorical activities.<sup>3</sup> In this way, it is assumed that discourse does not have to rely upon information that is imbued with exigencies, when the attempt is made to address an audience. It has been commonly believed that reliable communication can only be structured around knowledge of a higher order, so that discourse is not limited by the strictures imposed by everyday life. In short, common sense knowledge has not been considered appropriate to ground valid rhetorical discourse.

For example, even though Plato’s dialectic was originally designed as a rhetorical device to combat Sophistic formalism, he eventually settled upon an ideal form of knowledge to be the final product of this methodology. Only this abstract or *sui generis* type of knowledge was considered by Plato to be capable of sustaining sensuous interpersonal dialogue, for this information does not have the limited validity associated with convention.<sup>4</sup> Even though Aristotle’s dialectic has a different orientation from that of Plato, Aristotle understands pure or valid knowledge to be the product of only logical reasoning. The fundamental categories of Aristotle’s logic, however, are given a seignorial status and therefore are also categorically separated from the practical knowledge which underpins daily existence. A little later the Stoics advanced the idea that human reason mimics that which guides the cosmos, while Des-

<sup>3</sup> Chaim Perelman, *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities*, Holland: D. Reidel, 1979, pp. 159-167.

<sup>4</sup> George A. Kennedy *Classic Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980, pp. 41ff.

cartes substituted the pure cogito for the God of the Medieval Period as the ultimate foundation of rationality.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, both Kant's "categories" and Hegel's "Spirit" are divorced from the historicity indigenous to human *praxis*, while, most recently, the positivists' ahistorical "protocol statements" are thought to provide an inviolable ground of knowledge (a theoretical move which can also be found in Hobbes, Locke, Comte, and Durkheim).

Without attempting to be exhaustive, the point has been to suggest that throughout the history of rhetoric practical knowledge is not thought to provide a very reliable base for social discourse.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, everyday life is simply assumed to be too variegated to produce a uniform set of principles that can serve to entrain a speaker with an audience. Subsequently, the attempt has continually been made to propose an epistemological platform on which universal principles of discourse can be established. For one primary reason these principles are thought to be better able than those which emerge from everyday life to sustain rational dialogue between competing parties. That is, these abstract forms of reason are believed to exist *sui generis*, like Durkheim's "collective consciousness", and accordingly have universal applicability and validity. This collective mode of reasoning has perennially been called upon to engender the "public" knowledge Bitzer contends is essential for public, rhetorical discourse to be successfully maintained. What is important to remember at this juncture is that traditionally common sense and rhetorical reasoning are thought to be ontologically bifurcated from each other.

#### MODERN RHETORIC AND THE RESURRECTION OF COMMON SENSE AS A GROUND OF DISCOURSE

This tactic for securing a reliable ground for rhetorical discourse has not gone uncriticized. The most trenchant critique of the standard epistemological ground of rhetoric is that it is unnecessarily abstract. As a result of the high level of abstraction maintained

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Morris, *Western Political Thought*, Vol. I, New York, Basic Books, 1967, pp. 125-133.

<sup>6</sup> For a more extensive analysis of this trend in rhetorical thinking, see Chaim Perelman, *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities*, pp. 1-42.

by the traditional ground of rhetoric, an idealized audience is addressed that has no real existence. Simply, an imaginary audience is fabricated that is believed to conduct its affairs in terms of a universal form of reason, which may or may not approximate the style of logic used by the particular group of people that is being addressed. Because this abstract form of reason is not thought to be encumbered by the contingencies associated with everyday life, all so-called lesser forms of logic are systematically diminished and considered unfit to substantiate rhetorical discourse. When this happens, one specific type of reason is inadvertently associated with correct thinking, and, accordingly, is believed to be most appropriate for guiding a rhetorical exercise.

The key implication of this theoretical gambit is that there is a very good chance an audience will be addressed with a form of reason that is not its own. Subsequently, no real discourse will be present between an audience and the rhetorician, for these two parties will literally be speaking past each other. To remedy this problem many modern theorists are arguing that rhetoric should no longer avoid using the ground of knowledge supplied by everyday life to serve as a reliable base for rhetorical dialogue. As Natanson suggests, maybe rhetoric should become more of a “mundane” art, and avoid legitimizing itself on arcane or ethereal principles.<sup>7</sup>

Natanson does not mean by this that rhetoric should necessarily base itself on naively accepted ideas, but that intimate discourse can only be inaugurated by practical reason. Accordingly, an audience should not be approached as if it is a facsimile of some “universal audience” that is presumed to ground the logic employed by every assembly of persons. The social world, as Perelman suggests while relying on the work of Dupréel, must not be assumed to be structured along the lines specified by the classic macro/micro-cosmic relationship. When this is the case, it is correspondingly presumed that every micro-audience can be reduced to the categories used to explain the world that are indigenous to the macro- or “universal audience”. Rather, modern philosophers of rhetoric like Perelman contend that the social world is pluralistic

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Natanson, “The Acts of Indirection”, in *Rhetoric, Philosophy and Literature*, pp. 35-47.

in nature, with each respective locus capable of advancing its own emergent style of reason. This reason, moreover, cannot be revealed in the form of a universal or ahistorical logic, but can only be appreciated as a result of consulting the practical reason that governs the everyday existence of a population.

Manifestly, what this means is that modern theorists are maintaining that rhetoric should retrace its steps back to the realm occupied by common sense, if a reliable form of knowledge that can be used to sustain social discourse is to be secured. This trend is clearly illustrated in the work of Seebohm, as he documents the recent history of hermeneutics, particularly its importance for rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> As Seebohm points out, hermeneutics should no longer be viewed as merely a technical art, but more importantly must concern itself with the historicity of the logic possessed by any phenomenon that is studied. While commenting on the historical, as opposed to the assumed objective nature of logic, Landgrebe states that human existence solidifies itself through human action.<sup>9</sup> Correspondingly, it is this action that the rhetorician must reveal if the knowledge appropriate for social discourse is to be successfully garnered. This belief is also apparent in Gadamer's work on rhetoric, particularly when he suggests that serious dialogue can only be premised on the type of practical knowledge discussed by Aristotle.<sup>10</sup> Perelman, in a manner similar to the aforementioned authors, says that the knowledge on which an audience sustains itself does not exist *sui generis*, but is a product of collective "agreement".<sup>11</sup>

What each of these recent writers is saying in his own inimitable way is that, to use Habermas' term, rational knowledge is engendered only by human "interests". The most important implication of this view is that these interests may differ from location to location, and therefore different forms of reason may be operative

<sup>8</sup> Thomas M. Seebohm, "The Problem of Hermeneutics in Recent Anglo-American Literature: Part I", *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 10 (3), 1977, pp. 180-198; Seebohm, "The Problem of Hermeneutics in Recent Anglo-American Literature: Part II", *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 10 (4), 1977, pp. 263-275.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Landgrebe, *Major Problems in Contemporary European Philosophy*, New York, Frederick Ungar, 1966, pp. 102-122.

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1981, pp. 113-138.

<sup>11</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, p. 31.

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in varying situations. These interests constitute the basic existential frame of reference of “life-world” of an audience, and it is the direct knowledge of experience constituted by these persons that provides the base of reliable information necessary to sustain dialogue. It is the “life-world”, therefore, that the rhetorician must address if discourse is to occur, and not an abstract form of reason that is representative of an abstract “universal audience”. Modern theorists, in this sense, are appealing to the ontological domain usually associated with common sense knowledge to save rhetoric from the ignominious fate of becoming useless.

By attempting to restructure the base of knowledge used by the rhetorician on the “life-world”, modern theorists have tended to rely heavily on phenomenological philosophy, particularly the work of Husserl and Heidegger.<sup>12</sup> Derrida maintains that these writers made crucial errors in their theorizing which systematically eliminate the possibility of the “life-world” serving as the base of sensuous or reliable dialogue, although they originally wanted to avoid precisely this problem. Simply, Derrida contends that both Husserl and Heidegger’s work remains well within the tradition which states that apodictic knowledge can only be erected on ahistorical or abstract principles. Derrida wants to ensure that the theoretical task undertaken by the modern advocates of common sense knowledge is successfully completed, and he aids in this effort by proffering a “deconstruction” of common sense. He has not done this so that common sense knowledge might be eclipsed as a possible ground of rhetorical discourse, but that it may be deepened. Derrida, it might be said, wants to keep common sense knowledge within the realm constituted by human action, and he maintains that this is not currently the case.

#### DERRIDA’S DECONSTRUCTION OF COMMON SENSE

Derrida is fully cognizant that a variety of theorists throughout the history of social thought have proposed the idea that all knowledge

<sup>12</sup> For an example of this type of work, see the essays contained in *Interpersonal Communication: Essays in Phenomenology and Hermeneutics*, edited by Joseph J. Pilotta, Washington, D.C., University of America Press, 1982.

should be founded on human experience. Many of these attempts, however, have not resulted in knowledge being viewed as a *product* of experience, but experience merely serves as an epistemological conduit. For example, systems theory, positivism, and such diverse philosophies as those propagated by Stefan George and the early Wittgenstein have tried to restore experience to the heart of knowledge constitution, yet they have all failed miserably at this task. As a result, each of these theories understands experience to be an essential component of the knowledge acquisition process, but it is not the primordial ground of knowledge. Instead, knowledge is still assumed to be naturally disposed, and experience is provided the latitude to merely peruse the facade of the world.

Derrida contends that the more modern theories advanced by Husserl and Heidegger, both of whom are seen as the originators of the most recent rendition of the “life-world”, have also left knowledge naturally disposed. Of course, such a theoretical *faux pas* would result in the “life-world” not being significantly different from the natural world. Consequently, knowledge would have its own autonomous ground that is not dependent upon experience, and therefore human action would be subject to the capricious demands of this ground. The fate of the world, and in particular rhetorical discourse, would depend upon extremely abstract knowledge that can be understood to owe no responsibility to humankind. Derrida naturally wants to avoid this state of affairs.

What Derrida specifically strives to avoid at all costs is what he refers to as the “logocentric” view of writing and language. Logocentrism promotes what Derrida feels is bad metaphysics, simply because the assumed inside (*res cogitans*) and outside (*res extensa*) of the world are portrayed as ontologically separated.<sup>13</sup> Derrida argues that this version of writing can be discovered in the work of Rousseau, yet it has gained in popularity as a result of Saussure’s writing on the nature of language.<sup>14</sup> Derrida asserts that both of these writers make a theoretical error that has promoted the evisceration of language. Simply, both Rousseau and Saussure have

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, pp. 30ff; p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33; p. 48; p. 53; see also, Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 19.

distinguished between the “thing” that is signified by language and the linguistic signifier. Accordingly, it is assumed that an obtrusive *object* of signification exists in the world, and an equally *a priori* concept represents it. These two facets of language are, moreover, proclaimed to be isomorphic with each other. This rendition of language, as Derrida says, pronounced the “death of speech”, for language in effect is redundant and made irrelevant as a harbinger of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> The human action that embodies human action is literally choked by an objective, ahistorical form of knowledge that is presumed to subsist *sui generis*.

Durkheim’s influence on Saussure is readily apparent in this mimetic theory of language. That is, language is viewed to be constrained by a force that is external to it and is provided the ability to constrain the movement of speech. Language, therefore, is operative within an extremely limited domain, over which speech has little control. This type of writing, Derrida says while making reference to Plato, is “bad writing” and does not emanate from the “soul”, and therefore is confined to a mere spatial existence.<sup>16</sup>

As Derrida says:

“There is... a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled to the exteriority of the body”.<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, Derrida desires to “deconstruct” the tradition inspired by Saussure, so that impulse of language is free to follow its own self-appointed destiny.<sup>18</sup>

Derrida believes that Husserl and Heidegger followed in the footsteps of Saussure when they outlined their theories of language. Derrida, accordingly, claims to be undercutting the manner in which both these luminaries differentiated the sign, or *act* of signification, from what is signified. Derrida disagrees with Husserl on the following points: first, he maintains that Husserl under-

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 8; p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73; See also, Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 12.



stands language to be merely expressive, and therefore only capable of “attaching” meaning to an object.<sup>19</sup> Second, this results in Husserl retaining the original linguistic dualism promoted by Saussure.<sup>20</sup> Third, the object of language is then logically referred to as an *eidos*, for it has ontological status similar to that traditionally accorded Plato’s ideas.<sup>21</sup> He believed that Husserl allotted the object of signification the status of a pure present that can reveal itself to human beings. And fourth, Derrida maintains that Husserl’s version of logic (and thus language) is grounded on an ahistorical transcendental base, and therefore is fundamentally insulated from actual linguistic *praxis*.

Derrida objects to Heidegger for similar reasons, although he is sympathetic with Heidegger’s attempt to break with the idealism of Husserl. Nevertheless, Derrida maintains that Heidegger’s work remains too close to the tradition of Saussure for the following reasons: first, Derrida believes Heidegger was primarily concerned with raising the perennial question of Being.<sup>23</sup> As a result, second, Heidegger acts as if *logos* represents the originary word. Derrida contends this is just a new way of raising the old issue that pertains to the nature of the primal (ahistorical) ground of life. This ground of course represents Being that is differentiated from human existence. Third, Heidegger refers to linguistic acts as illuminating the pure presence of Being.<sup>24</sup> He believes that even Heidegger’s notion of *aletheia* is really no different than *adequatio*, for in each case Derrida feels linguistic truth is presumed to be a pure present. Fourth, Derrida insists that Heidegger is merely attempting to resurrect an absolute base of knowledge that has somehow become obscured. Derrida is certain that, if recovered, this ground will unquestionably stifle the eruption of language. In short, Derrida thinks that both Heidegger and Husserl have inappropriately raised the question of language, and subsequently have buried it in a metaphysical graveyard.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 290ff; see also, Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, pp. 13ff.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 286ff.

Derrida uses the work of Levi-Strauss to illustrate one of the more serious social implications of the logocentric tradition inaugurated by Saussure. Specifically, this rendition of language assumes that an objective referent of speech can be discovered, and that this style of thinking embodies the paragon of human rationality. If this attitude is manifested when someone is addressing an audience or population, the usual result is an ethnocentric understanding of the persons under scrutiny. In point of fact, Derrida evaluates Levi-Strauss' work to be exceedingly ethnocentric.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, this pristine characterization of language permits it to "violently" attack a phenomenon that is assumed to be plagued by the contingencies traditionally associated with an object that is considered to be merely historical. In a word, Being is naturally thought to legitimately dominate existence. As a result, the "universal" knowledge of Being is used to overpower a historical phenomenon, and the formation of a sensuous relationship between an individual and the group that is being addressed is impossible. As Derrida says, rhetoric may amount to nothing more than violence if it "reduces" or "leads" the Other.<sup>27</sup>

Derrida goes on to assert that rhetoric can only be worthwhile if it understands the Other to be a "non-phenomenon", or an "absence" that lends meaning to the world that would not otherwise exist.<sup>27</sup> For this to happen, however, a ground of knowledge must be articulated that does not entice the rhetorician into believing that an absolute style of Being can be conjured up, so that an unequivocal understanding of the Other might be procured. In other words, a type of knowledge base must be revealed that illustrates the need for a non-ethnocentric conception of the Other to be obtained, particularly if the Other is not to be violently attacked. Derrida feels he has provided the insight needed for this form of knowledge to be established.

In contrast to Saussure, Derrida states that really no distinction should be made between a sign and what is signified. For Derrida, there is no "thing itself" to which a sign is supposed to point, but every *Ding an sich* is "already a *representamen* shielded from the

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101-140.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 106.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

simplicity of intuitive evidence”.<sup>28</sup> What he means by this is that *both* a sign and what is supposedly signified are fully mediated by the interpretive dimension furnished by human action. The traditional sign, therefore, is merely a re-presentation of an already interpreted base of knowledge. As Derrida says, “the signifier first signifies a signifier, and not a thing itself or a directly presented signified”.<sup>29</sup> By making this theoretical move, Derrida has undercut the ontological dualism that has been tolerated since the time of Descartes, and which allows knowledge to be conceived as a pure presence. All knowledge, according to Derrida, is intimately associated with a vicissitude of human action, and subsequently cannot be viewed as objective or pristine in the usual sense. Language does not mimic knowledge, but contrary to this is inextricably interwoven with every phenomenon that is known.

For Derrida, language is actually born out of its own “degeneration” as an object.<sup>30</sup> Stated simply, language would be immaterial if it merely served to point out a phenomenon that is already presumed to have an objective status. Contrary to this view of human action, Derrida argues that language constitutes the fundamental form of knowledge, and therefore speech is not sterile. Human experience, subsequently, is comprehended to be the generative locus of all meaningful knowledge. By making this move, the domain usually thought to be occupied by common sense is restored to prominence as a base of reliable knowledge.

Nevertheless, this theoretical gambit requires that knowledge be conceptualized differently from what is traditionally the case. A knowledge entity (*on*) for Derrida does not represent Being, but embodies what he refers to as “*living* Being”.<sup>31</sup> Language is not considered by him to be moribund, but, while referring to Nietzsche, is understood to initiate the ontological “play” of the world.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, because all knowledge is infected by the rhythm of this “play”, all phenomena are as opaque or dense as this linguistic movement. According to Derrida this play of language is

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 79; See also, Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 50ff.

inescapable, and saturates all knowledge. Subsequently, the *topoi* that comprise the social world are not, as Derrida says, “indifferent”, but are circumscribed by the dance of language.<sup>33</sup> Most important is that no social situation represents a pure present of ahistorical or objective knowledge, but is a “trace” left by a social actor.<sup>34</sup>

Because speech for Derrida annihilates the distance that is traditionally thought to separate the word and the world, the usual object of language cannot be viewed as an originary or “first” presence.<sup>35</sup> Knowledge is not “present” but is dense, and can transform itself into a variety of textures. Language, accordingly, “traces” the world. The trace is a non-origin, or, more importantly, is the origin of the origin.<sup>36</sup> What Derrida is saying, simply, is that the inscription left by language, serves to “trace” the origin of all knowledge, so in this sense the “trace” is an origin that is not substantial, to use Aristotle’s term. Consequently, the “trace” cannot, as Derrida says, be “summed up in the simplicity of the present”.<sup>37</sup> Rather, the “trace” is a “presence-absence”, in that knowledge is certainly known, but only through the medium of itself.<sup>38</sup> The “trace” undercuts the “law of excluded middle”, and in doing so portrays knowledge to be a transparency of opposites (and not a reconciliation as Hegel suggests), whereby the “play” of language lends momentary stability to a form of social knowledge. In general, Derrida uses this notion of the “trace” to announce that no ultimate origin of reason exists, but instead that all knowledge resides under the erasure of the “trace”.

The “trace”, therefore, is not representative of scientific knowledge in the traditional sense, but is a “reserve”. Stated simply, this means that the “trace” does not indicate anything, but rather is an “indeterminate index” that opens up the world. On this issue Derrida is in agreement with Merleau-Ponty.<sup>40</sup> Specifically, the “trace” continually overflows itself, or, as Merleau-Ponty suggests,

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 69.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 95.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 11.

language conveys more and less than was originally intended by a speaker. Derrida then goes on to say that the linguistic “trace” is by nature “supplementary”.<sup>41</sup> The “trace”, however, does not supplement anything other than itself; the “trace” employs its own ambivalence about itself to promote clarity. This knowledge is not “self-same”, but is socially forged into the whisper of truth that is meekly brought to public attention by tradition.

This type of public knowledge is not “present” but is “deferred”.<sup>42</sup> That is, the “trace” is obviously known once it is comprehended, but its meaning is never totalized, for it can never be reproduced as an ultimate end or picture. In this sense, Being is not known but “*différance*”: a type of knowledge that is known, but which overflows itself. “*Différance*”, therefore, is not similar to Hegel’s notion of *Aufheben*, in that Derrida would demand that each moment of the dialectic be “deferred” before it is reconciled. The ground of knowledge provided by “*différance*” is not a primal origin, but is a stage where the play of language reveals its dramatic character. “*Différance*” is not Being, but is the “temporalization” of Being (*on*).

This idea that Being has meaning only if it is contaminated by the movement of time would sound preposterous to the tradition which supports logocentrism. Yet for Derrida, the “*différance*” of the “trace” reveals the only type of Being that is valid—i.e., a Being that is a concrete universal.

#### DERRIDA’S REALM OF SOCIAL DISCOURSE

As Derrida proclaims, “*différance*” is the “*sameness* that is not *identical*”.<sup>43</sup> Because language is no longer thought by him to merely point to an indubitable ground of knowledge, social sameness cannot be assumed to exist in a similar manner in every locale. Instead, sameness is embodied in the linguistic “trace” that supports the social solidarity of a community; language makes same-

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 289ff.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 136.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

ness where empirically none can be found. Using the suggestive language of Walter Benjamin, the “trace” is not obtrusive but instead is quite fragile, and yet is powerful enough to sustain social discourse. Moreover, because this “trace” is finite it is concrete, but it is also universal because it is potentially social. In this sense, the “trace” is the concrete universal that is presupposed by the existence of social discourse.

Because this universal is concrete, Derrida makes sure to inform his readers that it must not be construed to be similar to Leibniz’s notion of a *mathesis universalis*.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, the audience cannot be treated as if it is merely a subset of an abstract “universal audience”, but rather all discourse is sustained by principles that are universal and simultaneously mediated by the concrete situation. To borrow a term from Durkheim, Derrida does not understand the “trace” to reflect a “collective consciousness”, but, in a manner reminiscent of Sartre, resembles a type of “collective *praxis*”. In order for the rhetorician to properly approach an audience, this “domain of commitment” (or *praxis*) that serves to coalesce a group must be penetrated.

What Derrida goes on to say is that the absolute ground of discourse is certainly the universal understanding that is promoted by intersubjectivity, as opposed to the universal logic associated with any form of social ontological realism. Nevertheless, discourse is more than intersubjectivity; discourse occurs within the “peril of interrogation”.<sup>45</sup> In order to properly understand what Derrida means by this it must be remembered that positivists also understood intersubjectivity, as promoted by scientific procedures, to be the foundation of all reliable knowledge. Derrida recognizes, however, that intersubjectivity does not merely reflect agreement about the nature of some objective fact or procedure. Instead, intersubjectivity is imbued with both understanding and misunderstanding, where, as Buber suggests, question and answer do not automatically agree with each other. What Derrida is saying is that intersubjectivity is possible, but only as a result of correct interpretation, and not necessarily the immediate recognition of uniform principles of logic that are thought to coadunate a society.

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, *Positions*, p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 29.

What this interpretive view of reason implies, using the phraseology supplied by Perelman, is that every social locus must be viewed as “reasonable” in character, instead of imbued with the self-certainty afforded by Reason.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the only way that the “face” of the Other can be reached, according to Derrida, is through a recognition of the plurality of Being signified by the “trace”.<sup>47</sup> In the wake of a plurality of Being, the monistic conception of life that underpins ethnocentrism is summarily undercut. Derrida characterizes the major implication of this theoretical move, while addressing the work of Levinas, by saying that the only way to speak to a Chinese citizen is in Chinese.<sup>48</sup> Of key importance is that discourse must be “lured” into existence, so that the Being of an audience is captured as it is mediated by the tradition of its members.

For Derrida, then, rhetoric is based on “common sense”, but not a *sensus communis* that can be associated with a hypothetical “universal audience”. The *sensus communis* that the rhetorician must envision is not based on Reason, but the logic that is linguistically “traced” to form the “domain of commitment” that a collective of persons inhabit. Derrida maintains that the only way reliable discourse can be engendered with an audience is by making an attempt to tap the concrete base of knowledge, or “biography” of a community, as Schutz says, that gives a group of people a sense of solidarity or meaning.

## CONCLUSION

The attempt has been made in this paper to illustrate how Derrida tries to save rhetoric from making metaphysical commitments that might render it useless. What he does is to radicalize the philosophical tradition which grounds knowledge on the *sensus communis* established by the constitutive power of human experience. Derrida feels that the knowledge associated with pure presence is undoub-

<sup>46</sup> Perelman, *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities*, pp. 111-123.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 141.

<sup>48</sup> For a full discussion of this point, see Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 139ff.

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tedly perspicuous, but it is not alive. Only knowledge that is considered to be in tune with the dance enacted by human experience is reliable, for it is this knowledge that sustains social order, according to Derrida.

If the rhetorician, accordingly, is not to do violence to a community, an audience must be addressed in terms of its own logic if real discourse is to be engendered. Every audience must therefore not be treated as a hypothetical “universal audience”, but a community that is congealed by the “collective praxis” of its members. A community is not a genus but *praxis*, and it is this human action that unites a community and, accordingly, must be consulted if the rhetorician is to properly address an audience. Using Gadamer’s example, the horizon of existence of the rhetorician must “fuse” with that advanced by a particular community if social competence is to be exhibited by the rhetorician.

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