

Ever Since Derrida



The Evil Genius of a King, Giorgio de Chirico, 1915

We live in a world where words are incrementally being corrupted, obfuscation widely practised, double-talk and blatant lies emanating every day from the mainstream media,

scientists, academics, clerics and politicians. Some evil acts are now called good; dark is called light; and bitter called sweet. But there's nothing sweet about the Age of Confusion that is the 2020s. One wonders how we got to this bleak situation of syntactical, semantical anarchy.

About 25 years ago, while lecturing in a university, I attended a talk one evening by Jacques Derrida, who lived in France but was born to Jewish parents in Algiers in 1930 (he died in 2004). The talk was scheduled in the opposite building in the college campus.

A philosophy professor I knew was a close friend of Derrida, and he invited him to give the lecture. Being deeply interested in why Derrida had rock-star status and was regarded as the world's most-famous philosopher, I decided to see what he had to say. On the night of the talk, I managed to sit through the entire convoluted waffle in great distress, while the audience clapped like circus seals when the talk ended.

I wanted to walk up to Derrida, who came across as a stereotypical French philosopher with a perfect tan, and say, "Mr Derrida, can you not communicate deconstructionism in a more understandable, clearer way? I work in the opposite building teaching prose, syntax and semantics, and my motto to my students is taken from the Bible: "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' be your 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." (Matthew 5:37).

I could've also quoted him Isaiah 5:20, but Derrida would probably have challenged the merits/qualities of the different shades (or hierarchies) of dark and light, likewise the endless, or multiple, variations of the degrees of bitter and sweet. But with numerous possibilities, to what end, i.e., ad absurdum?

For Derrida, language is impossible to determine. Ironically,

he probably was aware of his self-defeating words: if language is impossible to determine, then such a statement is self-refuting. I doubt if the audience on the night understood the lost-in-translation French-to-English versions of their hero's work. I mean, who could fail to not understand statements like, "To see to it that the beyond does not return to the short-of is to recognize in the contortion the necessity of a trail"? (*The Madness of Jacques Derrida*, by Josh Herring). Derrida wasn't mad, but I found him to be a poor verbal communicator of deconstructionism, which is an interesting concept similar to the philosophical ideas of appearance and reality.

If I can borrow from the English Franciscan friar, William of Ockham (1287-1347), and his principle 'Ockham's Razor', I believe that the method of deconstruction should not be multiplied beyond necessity. In other words, one doesn't need to analyze language or sentences into the ground to understand their true, absolute meaning. When presented with competing meanings in language, one should select the concept with the fewest assumptions and makes the best common sense, otherwise we're faced with an analytical, textual probe into endless possibilities.

In fairness to Derrida, he's not the worst offender of poor communication. Pope Francis would give him a run for his money with his infamous airplane gobbledygook press statements. Who to blame? Wittgenstein? Heidegger? Hegel? The art of talking from both sides of one's mouth and mangling complex concepts has a long history. And there's also a fear in questioning the emperor's new clothes.

Some 25 years ago, consider the *Sokal Affair*, also called the *Sokal Hoax*. It was a scholarly hoax performed by Alan Sokal, a physics professor at New York University and University College London. In 1996, he submitted an article to *Social Text*, a 'revered' journal of postmodern/cultural studies. The submission was an experiment to test the

journal's standards of rigorously analysing text for original, authentic material. However, the paper was a spoof, riddled with nonsense. It was called, *Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*, and was published in the journal's spring/summer 1996 "Science Wars" issue. It was alleged at the time that leftist, anti-intellectual sentiment in liberal arts departments (especially English departments) caused the increase of deconstructionist thought, which eventually resulted in a deconstructionist critique of science. So much for deconstructionism.

So, to repeat, how did we get to this bleak situation? Dwight Longenecker, recently wrote in *The Stream* (Nov 17): "It's not too hard to figure out what has gone wrong. It's called relativism. Relativism is the idea that there is no such thing as truth, or if there is, it is impossible to state the truth accurately and authoritatively. In other words, dogma—the definite expression of truth—is impossible. Relativism has been creeping into our society like an insidious cancer for the last 70 years."

Deconstructionism reminds me of relativism and the parable of the blind men and an elephant. This is a story of a group of blind men who have never come across an elephant before and who learn and imagine what the elephant is like by touching it. *Each blind man feels a different part of the elephant's body, but only one part, such as the side or the tusk. They then describe the elephant based on their limited experience and their descriptions of the elephant are different from each other. The moral of the parable is that humans have a tendency to claim absolute truth based on their limited, subjective experience as they ignore other people's limited, subjective experiences which may be equally true.*

In other words, the 'whole' is not the 'holes' (e.g. tiny porous gaps, like inside a tree, etc, making up the 'whole'). Despite this, common sense and logic should lead the way in interpreting language and the world around us. Failing to

believe in an objective reality is to be trapped in a solipsistic swamp of secular solitude.