Pirsig and Derrida: The Priority of Rhetoric

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Plato and Aristotle are villains. Husserl is a villain. Chomsky may already be a villain and Eldon Lytle well on the way to becoming one. At least they all could be if Robert Pirsig and Jacques Derrida have their way. Pirsig and Derrida, in the books I here examine, would seem to have little in common. But both Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena* and *Other Essays on Husserl's Phenomenology* have a kind of faddish popularity, Pirsig's among general readers, Derrida's among the French avant garde. Both books are deeply involved in language problems. Both books directly challenge the dominant philosophical positions of the Western world, and both books directly challenge the most basic assumptions on which transformational and junction grammars are based. My concern in this paper is to examine these basic challenges. But because the books contrast so strangely, I will have to work somewhat indirectly, examining first the approach of each, then the demonstration, then the significance.

The contrast in approach is especially sharp. Pirsig's book is somewhere between autobiography and fiction. The narrative frame is a motorcycle journey the narrator takes with his eleven-year-old son from Minneapolis through Montana to San Francisco, the main narrative interest centering around the strained relations between father and son, both of whom are struggling with intense emotional problems that bring both close to insanity. The narrative develops its own intensity but also frames the continuing "Chautauqua" which develops the quasi-philosophical content, itself a quest both for the narrator's earlier self, whom he calls Phaedrus and who was eliminated by electrical shock treatments, and for some kind of philosophical absolute on which to ground both an abstract and a very practical philosophy. Since the narrator (lacking other identification, I call him Pirsig) has only the vaguest of memories plus some writings to go on, his quest for Phaedrus' ideas parallels Phaedrus' own. Except that Pirsig has the advantage of a triple perspective, at once reconstructor, critic, and what's left of Phaedrus.

In sharp contrast, Derrida's book is aggressively philosophical. The book begins and largely develops as a sharply critical analysis of Husserl's phenomenology, primarily his account of language. But one knows fairly early that the analysis of Husserl will finally be subordinate to, and used as an approach to, Derrida's own ideas. His approach is both very specific and very broad. He works through a detailed analysis of Husserl's language, but he is primarily concerned with the large assumptions that underlie Husserl's theory. The analysis is rigorous, intense—and increasingly exasperating in its sly word-play and highly metaphorical language.

As we would expect from their contrasting approaches, the two books contrast almost as sharply in the demonstrations that develop the philosophical challenges.
Pirsig's demonstration begins with a contrast between himself and their traveling companions, the Sutherlands. Pirsig is at home with technology; the Sutherlands distrust it. Their hatred of the ugliness produced by technology Pirsig sees as part of the romantic revolt against technology. He sees as classical his own concern with keeping his old motorcycle running efficiently by knowing and working with its underlying form.

But to see the motorcycle or the world or anything else as underlying form is to see it as a logical system, which had been the passion of Phaedrus through most of his intellectual life. Hence Pirsig's concern to analyze analysis itself, that is, the tools of logic. As he breaks the motorcycle down into smaller and smaller components, Pirsig says, he is also building a structure that represents the complete motorcycle at the top of the box pyramid. So the motorcycle itself is "primarily a metal phenomenon" (p.94), conceived in the mind before it could ever be built.

All this acts as concrete support for his earlier argument that the law of gravity is essentially an invention of man, that modern man has his own ghosts, pre- eminent among them the so-called natural laws, all of which assume a totally logical structure of the universe before man discovers the laws. But such laws, Pirsig argues, pass "every test of non-existence there is" (p. 33) -- until someone creates them. No motorcycle exists in nature. Neither does steel, the steel that becomes the motorcycle. And so Phaedrus had been pursuing a ghost: "rationality itself, that dull, complex, classical ghost of underlying form" (p.99).

But Phaedrus had begun examining hypotheses as entities. He had discovered that thinking up hypotheses is the easiest part of the scientific method; in fact, the number of hypotheses that can explain any given phenomenon actually increases with experimentation and knowledge--perhaps can even be infinite, which if true would be a "catastrophic logical disproof of the general validity of the scientific method" (p. 108). True or not, increasing knowledge shortens the time span in which any given hypothesis is considered valid, with the result that "it is science itself that is leading mankind from single absolute truths to multiple, indeterminate, relative ones"(109). The scientific method, therefore, though it has been remarkably successful in solving the practical problems of mankind, has actually created our "current social crisis" because of a "genetic defect within the nature of reason itself... the whole structure of reason is... emotionally hollow, esthetically meaningless and spiritually empty" (p. 110).

Having found the genetic defect in reason, Phaedrus had spent years in sometimes diffuse, sometimes concentrated quest for solutions beyond reason to his own and society's dilemmas. That quest had taken him through formal philosophy at least to Kant, whom Phaedrus had found fascinating, but finally ugly in his applying reason to esthetics. After Kant, reason remains ugly in almost any context, until it has "all but shut out everything else and now dominates man himself" (pp. 121-22). The ugliness had led Phaedrus finally to India and the formal study of Oriental philosophy, especially Zen. Which he abandons in turn when the professor argues that everything, even the bomb over Hiroshima, is illusory.
Phaedrus' answer to reason finally develops—"crystalizes"—in long waves set off by a seemingly inane remark from a lady colleague at Montana State: "I hope you are teaching Quality to your students" (p. 175). Before the waves finally end in his madness, Phaedrus has identified Quality as something we all recognize but can't define and has come to see Quality as the generator of both subject and object—hence as the ultimate reality, an undefinable Absolute which Phaedrus equates with the Tao. Quality as event; Quality as generator and hence reconciler of both romantic and classic, and of subject and object; Quality as "the continuing stimulus which our environment puts upon us to create the world in which we live. All of it. Every last bit of it" (p. 245). Phaedrus had been aware of incipient madness in these exclamations but could find no reason to withdraw them.

Pirsig has reservations about the heights Phaedrus had reached. And he reads philosophy to find out, finally coming to Poincaré, who also had discovered the multiplicity of hypotheses to explain facts and then had decided that the selection among hypotheses is made "on the basis of 'mathematical beauty,' of the harmony of numbers and forms" (p. 261). Pirsig sees that Poincaré and Phaedrus had traveled different roads to the same theoretical heights, that each had left his system incomplete, but that each completed the other "in a kind of harmony that both Phaedrus and Poincaré had talked about, to produce a complete structure of thought capable of uniting the separate languages of Science and Art into one" (p. 263).

Pirsig makes good melodrama of Phaedrus' skirmish with the professors at the University of Chicago, where Phaedrus had gone—the very stronghold of Aristotelian logic—to try to publish his findings as a doctoral dissertation. Phaedrus had been angered there to discover Plato's and Aristotle's elevation of dialectic and logic over rhetoric and had finally found the Sophists, with their emphasis on virtue, on arete (excellence) and on rhetoric. He had defeated the Chairman in serious academic skirmish, but had ended in madness, then in the electrical shocks that had transformed Phaedrus into the present narrator. But long before, he had rejected logic in favor of rhetoric as the base for language.

To move from Pirsig's narrative to Derrida's rigorous philosophical analysis does not mean we have to follow in detail Derrida's critique of Husserl. To do so would involve us almost as much in Husserl as in Derrida, and would require extended explication. What we can do is to trace something of the broad movement of his argument and catch something of its flavor.

Derrida sets up the basic problem explicitly enough in his introductory chapter. Derrida argues that Husserl's phenomenology, which prides itself on being free of metaphysical presuppositions, is actually itself crucially based on its own presuppositions, so that much of Derrida's purpose is to show that Husserl's analysis is itself metaphysics. As the crucial example, Derrida focuses on Husserl's concept of the sign: "How can we justify the decision which subordinates a reflection on the sign to a logic?" and "What gives a theory of knowledge the authority to determine the essence and origin of language?" (p. 7). Derrida italicizes decision to suggest that it was not a decision at all, simply an explicit
assumption, which Husserl never really examined, but the consequences of which are "limitless." Most importantly for my purposes, "... being interested in language only within the compass of rationality, determining the logos from logic, Husserl had, in a most traditional manner, determined the essence of language by taking the logical as its telos or norm" (p. 8).

The force of this should suggest how completely Derrida rejects the idea of a transcendent logic that somehow precedes and becomes the cause, the base, and the norm of language. What he opposes to it is life, discourse (language in action), ultimately freedom itself. That is, life, experience, human needs and human choices—not some a priori logic—create language. Derrida devotes much of his metaphysical analysis to refuting what he sees as the real telos of the logical: "being as presence." The essence of that long, complex argument seems to me best caught in another sentence from the Introduction: "... language is properly the medium for this play of presence and absence" or in the question that follows: "Is there not within language—is it not language itself that might seem to unify life and ideality?" (p. 10).

To arrive at such a vision of language Derrida rejects two of Husserl's most basic concepts: his sharp distinction between indication and expression (analogous to Saussure's now famous distinction between signifier and signified), and his concept of "pure" expression without communication (which can take place only in the "solitary mental life"). For Derrida, Husserl's admission that meaning is "interwoven" with signs does not go far enough: "the discursive sign, and consequently the meaning, is always involved, always caught up in an indicative system" (p. 20), or, more sweepingly, "the totality of speech is caught up in an indicative web" (p. 31). That is, signs are more than abstract indicators waiting to be infused with life and meaning. They exist and have meaning in themselves through the play of differences, as Derrida will argue, that makes possible our recognition of phonemes, which in turn makes possible a written language.

The concepts of pure expression and solitary mental life are just as suspect for Derrida—and perhaps even more basic for Husserl. They depend largely on a concept of time which Husserl himself later rejects, the concept of "now" as a discrete moment, isolated from past and future, in which pure expression—a man talking to himself—can take place. In soliloquy, Husserl argues, communication takes place in the "blink of an eye," and hence signs only seem to be necessary. They are merely fictitious: the mind already knows what it is telling itself. But for Derrida, signs owe their very existence to primordial repetition and hence are time-bound: "The sign is originally wrought by fiction" (p. 56, Derrida's italics). It follows that "there is no sure criterion by which to distinguish an outward language from an inward language or, in the hypothesis of an inward language, an effective language from a fictitious language" (p. 56).

Derrida does have positive answers to these rejections, answers that he pulls together in his teasing and paradoxical concept of differance, a word Derrida coins by substituting a for e, which leaves the French pronunciation unchanged.
The word in French puns on two meanings of difference, based on the verb differ, one spatial (to differ, to be apart, unlike, distinctively different), the other temporal (to defer, to delay). If our perception of now depends on our sense of past and future, then even though we experience no punctually isolated instant our sense of time still depends on our ability to defer in both directions in time and also to differentiate the now from past and future. In the same way, our experience of the phoneme in discourse is an experience not of continuity but of differentiation. The phoneme becomes sign by viture of primordial repetition, but we experience it as sign because we can differentiate it from other phonemes--both in time and in aural configuration, or physical configuration in printing. It is in this "play of differance," born not of a priori logic but of life, of experience, that Derrida finds both the source and meaning of language and, one would guess from his teasing lyricism, of life itself. Having established it, he can announce, somewhat grandiously, the closure of the history of metaphysics, that is, the end of a traditional metaphysical system which has taken as its most basic assumption that the universe is logical and that language grew out of that logic. "It remains, then," he concludes, "for us to speak, to make our voices resonate throughout the corridors in order to make up for the breakup of presence" (p. 104).

If Pirsig and Derrida contrast sharply in approach and demonstration, however, their implications are much the same, extending even to the large claims each makes for what he has found. Widespread acceptance of their ideas could revolutionize Western-world thinking about logic and language and perhaps about metaphysics itself. Without taking time for detailed analysis, let me just suggest some of the implications for philosophy before looking in some detail at implications for language. Widespread triumph of their ideas probably would mean something of the closure of metaphysics that Derrida announces. That is, it would mean the end of a 2500-year era dominated by the assumption of a logic beyond the physical and independent of it. Such a closure could hardly fail to make the two books part of one of the great watershed movements in the history of human thought: the end of an era dominated by reason and the beginning of one presumably dominated by rhetoric or by Quality; the end of an era dominated by Plato and Aristotle and the beginning of one dominated by the Sophists--or by Derrida.

Such acceptance would also mean the end of both rationalism and empiricism, because these, so directly opposed to each other in many ways, share the assumption of a rational universe, hence of a logic that exists independent of experience--just waiting to be discovered, the empiricist would say. Acceptance could also mean the end of structuralism. Even though structuralist methods may approach knowledge through fragmentation, the underlying assumptions are almost totally holistic: beneath all the apparent formlessness the universe is completely coherent, completely structured, with language as the paradigm of that structure.

The implications for literature, composition and linguistics are just as pervasive as for philosophy. Given Derrida's commitment to rhetoric, to making our voices resonate through the corridors, we can be almost certain that he would share Pirsig's concern for the quality of that rhetoric. The over-riding implication, of course, is that rhetorical
considerations would no longer be subordinate to logic. The general result of this would undoubtedly be to elevate language study at the expense of logic, possibly at the expense of broader philosophical studies. In literature, it would strongly reinforce what most literary people have always felt to be true: that literary excellence has little to do with logic or fact, that language as medium becomes more important than any system of ideas "out there" it may be trying to catch, that the effectiveness of a literary work does not depend primarily on how well it catches objective reality. Given Pirsig's emphasis on Quality, the study of significant literature would surely become more important--maybe even as important as we teachers of literature have thought it should have been all along.

Our sense of literature as superior to the claims of logic and factuality would, with Pirsig and Derrida, extend to other forms of discourse. Pirsig envisions the end--and heaven help it to come--of the long era of teaching composition in which two errors in agreement or three misplaced modifiers or one sentence fragment or comma splice constitute mortal sins. Even the currently popular emphasis on rhetorical patterns, primarily a logical emphasis would in Pirsig's vision be subordinated to the student's coming to a conviction that Quality, even though undefined, is real, recognizable by him and accessible to him. Such a recognition would be the beginning of the student's own quest for excellence, and all the problems of rhetoric and correctness would fall into meaningful perspective as tools toward Quality. No longer would the quest be to avoid errors, but to have quality ideas and control of the tools to give quality expression to them. Happy vision!

For linguistics, our real concern here, the implications might be just as revolutionary. Nearly all the currently popular attempts to explain or describe language, except those associated with Derrida, assume both a logical structure in language itself and a logical system in the universe that somehow language tries to mirror. The denial of that a priori logic is, as we have seen, one of the central points of Derrida's challenge of Husserl. Derrida also explicitly challenges the basic linguistic distinctions of Saussure, especially that between signifier and signified. In doing so, he challenges the major continental schools of structuralist linguistics, which look to Saussure for their linguistic base. Transformational and generative approaches now dominate American linguistics, and these, in all their expressions that I am familiar with, depend heavily on the Chomskian distinction between surface structure and deep structure, the deep structure being a kind of idealized abstraction of all language--and languages--which all races and individuals share, built into their primordial consciousness. The deep structure is conceived of as a totally logical system and as such would at least implicitly mirror a totally logical universe, again the very point that Pirsig and Derrida challenge. Whence, of course, the villainy that I began with--the villainy of Plato and Aristotle and Chomsky and Lytle, all of whom develop logical or linguistic systems based upon assumptions of a priori logic.

But more profound, perhaps, than any of these is an implication that Pirsig hardly touches but that Derrida glories in: If there is no ideal logical world that language mirrors, if meaning can never be ideal in the
sense of catching exactly that ideal world, if language is always context-bound and develops only by a long history of developing differences, then total meaning can never be wholly present, can never catch totally in language any idea or fact or experience. And we could never communicate it fully even if we could somehow catch it: Any possible reader or auditor would necessarily have a different context from which to receive and interpret any system of sounds or discourse. What follows is the strong recent emphasis on the indeterminacy of language. We are, so the analysis goes, profoundly prisoners of language. We experience language only from inside it and have no way of getting outside to test our perceptions and responses.

The implications of this picture of the human condition push out in every direction. I mention just two. If we can never communicate exactly, never come to an absolute and final reading of a text, never give full expression to what we conceive and communicate, at least we now know something of the dimensions of the problem, can marvel at how well we have been able to communicate and can try even harder for more effective, more precise communication. A second implication would surely be that those of us involved in the study of language, whether literarily, linguistically, or philosophically, find ourselves at the center of one of the most fascinating and ultimately important of human endeavors. We may never be able to find our way out of the prison of language, but we should be able to create an ever richer world for ourselves within it.

All through the making of this analysis I have been aware of my own ambivalence to both books. I am wary of the sweeping claims of both. I am uncomfortable with Pirsig's popularizing and his social and personal nostrums, even more wary of his introducing all the issues of the campus rebellions of his time and resolving them on the side of the rebels. Many of the answers are just too easy for the problems they purport to solve. I dislike the recurring system of escape hatches for ideas that may not work: he can always blame them on Phaedrus, who went crazy. I am perhaps even more uncomfortable with my inability to pin Derrida down. I think I have caught here his basic attitudes and arguments. But try as I will I cannot find any solid footing that will make me comfortable in that world of differances he glories in.

Even so, I have found the books, especially in conjunction, remarkably challenging. I don't really expect such a triumph as I have posited in exploring implications. Metaphysicians and metaphysical dualists are hardly going to run for cover--nor are Chomsky and Lytle--under the attacks of Pirsig and Derrida. But their ideas need and deserve a hearing. We hardly have to accept them whole and without reservation. If the theoretical base of transformational and junction grammar--the foundation of our ambitious computer-assisted translation project--should turn out to be sandy or spongy, we need to know, if only to let us lay stronger foundations. And who knows? Perhaps we will find ourselves one day in a world where, without having lost our reason, the quest for Quality will guide all decisions and where all voices will resonate in harmony rather than cacaphony down the corridors, resonate toward some definition of being, perhaps other than presence--but some definition that even the notoriously slippery system of signs we call language will help us give voice to and that will give us a little higher understanding of ourselves and of our humanness.
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