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Backman, Jussi

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Logocentrism and the Gathering Λόγος: Heidegger, Derrida, and the Contextual Centers of Meaning

Jussi Backman
University of Helsinki

Abstract

Derrida’s deconstructive strategy of reading texts can be understood as a way of highlighting the irreducible plurality of discursive meaning that undermines the traditional Western “logocentric” desire for an absolute point of reference. While his notion of logocentrism was modeled on Heidegger’s articulation of the traditional ontotheological framework of Aristotelian metaphysics, Derrida detects a logocentric remnant in Heidegger’s own interpretation of gathering (Versammlung) as the basic movement of λόγος, discursiveness. However, I suggest that Derrida here touches upon a certain limit of deconstruction. As Derrida himself points out, the “decentering” effect of deconstruction does not simply abolish the unifying and focalizing function of discourse. Insofar as deconstruction involves reading and interpreting, it cannot completely evade narrative focalization. Rather, both Heidegger and Derrida can be understood as addressing the radical contextuality of all discursive centers and focal points, as well as the consequent impossibility of an ultimate and definitive metanarrative.

1 I want to thank Björn Thorsteinsson for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
Keywords

logocentrism, deconstruction, metaphysics of presence, contextuality, narrativity

Jacques Derrida stands today as one of Heidegger’s most prominent philosophical heirs. This is a role that he himself always readily acknowledged, emphasizing, however, that responsible inheriting does not mean a simple reaffirmation of what has been handed down. The intrinsic heterogeneity of every philosophical inheritance, its textual quality in the wide Derridean sense, rather necessitates a critical response, “a filtering, a choice, a strategy”—a selective reading. This strategy makes Derrida, in the words of Elisabeth Roudinesco, a “faithful and unfaithful heir.”

Derrida’s faithful/unfaithful double aspect is particularly manifest in his readings of the Heideggerian corpus, which in spite of its seminal importance in Derrida’s own philosophical formation was not preserved intact from the effects of deconstruction. In 1967 Derrida describes his strategy with regard to Heidegger in the following manner:

. . .despite this debt to Heidegger’s thought, or rather because of it, I attempt to locate within Heidegger’s text—which, no more than any other, is not homogeneous, continuous, everywhere equal to the greatest force and to all the consequences of its questions—the signs of a belonging to metaphysics, or to what he calls onto-theology.

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3 Derrida and Roudinesco, De quoi demain, 14; For What Tomorrow…, 2.
Heidegger’s discourse is to be searched for signs, for elements that potentially retain it within the limits of what Heidegger himself attempts to delimit as (traditional, Western, Platonic-Aristotelian) “metaphysics,” basic aspects of which were identified by the later Heidegger as “ontotheology” and by the earlier Derrida as “logocentrism.” Let us take a brief look at these closely related notions.

“Ontotheology” is basically Heidegger’s term for the twofold structure of Aristotelian metaphysics as ontology (the study of being\(^5\) \textit{qua} being) and theology (the study of the supreme being). For Aristotle, there is no single determinate sense of “being as such” that would encompass all instances of “to be.” A “scientific” ontology in Aristotle’s sense is therefore achievable only by way of theology, which completes ontology with an account of the metaphysical God, the supreme entity, as the model of ontological perfection for all other beings. The only feature common to all things that are said to be is their situatedness in different hierarchies of being-more-or-less (such as actuality/potentiality, substantiality/predicability, or essentiality/contingency), and the universal point of reference for these hierarchies is the specific being whose being consists in pure actuality, pure substantiality, and pure essentiality. The supreme entity thus provides the only determinate “unity of being.”\(^6\) In Heidegger’s historical narrative, this ontotheological approach to the question of the general meaning of “to be” in terms of a paradigmatic and ultimate \textit{instance} of “to be” persists in different forms throughout the metaphysical tradition, from Plato to Nietzsche.\(^7\) According to Heidegger’s central thesis, the ideal of

\(^5\) I use “being” to translate Aristotle’s \textit{τὸ ὄν} in the general and abstract sense and Heidegger’s infinitival \textit{Sein}; “beings” or “a being” is used to translate \textit{τὰ ὄντα} and \textit{das Seiende}. Following the practice of the Emad and Maly translation of \textit{Contributions to Philosophy}, I use the hyphenated “be-ing” to render Heidegger’s archaic orthography \textit{Seyn}.


\(^7\) For Heidegger’s account of ontotheology, see, for example, Martin Heidegger, “Die seinsgeschichtliche Bestimmung des Nihilismus” [1944–46], in \textit{Nietzsche}, vol. 2., 6th ed. (Stuttgart: Neske, 1998), 311–15; translated
being inherent in the tradition is constant presence (bestämdige or ständige Anwesenheit, for Heidegger, the implicit sense of Aristotle’s οὐσία, “substance” or “entity”); in the sense of a determinate and self-identical accessibility to intuitive awareness (νοῦς); hence Derrida’s idiom “metaphysics of presence.” The perfection of the supreme entity can be regarded as consisting precisely in different aspects of an ideally constant presence/accessibility, such as self-sufficiency, completeness, simplicity, and uniqueness.

The term “logocentrism” was originally coined by the philosopher of life Ludwig Klages to designate the Platonic tendency to subordinate the dynamic unity of life or “soul” to “spirit.” For Derrida, it denotes the (no less Platonic) tendency to subordinate the full material reality of discourse and language to λόγος in the sense of an ideal “logical” meaning-structure—and, ultimately, to subordinate all discursive structures to a “transcendental signified,” to λόγος in the sense of an ultimate central “meaning” that would no longer refer to anything other than itself and would thus provide a self-sufficient and permanently accessible center for discursive chains of references. In his seminal 1966 paper at Johns Hopkins, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida asserts that in Western philosophy and science, “structure—or rather the structurality of structure—although it has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring it to a point


of presence, a fixed origin.” Logocentrism is the desire of discursive thought to transcend discursive structures in order to arrive at a point at which the basic contextualizing movement of discourse—the endless “deferral” (différance) in which meanings always turn out to be constituted by references to other meanings, those meanings in turn referring to others—would cease and be consummated in an immediate disclosure of the non-referential and undeferred presence of an absolute meaning. In this sense, “logocentrism” is another name for “ontotheology.”

One of the key insights of Derrida’s earlier work was related to the complicity between logocentrism and “phonocentrism,” a conception of language that privileges the live voice (φωνή) over writing, which, in turn, is regarded as a secondary representation of speech. A written text is a texture of material signs, the meaning of which is never discovered “immediately” but rather is generated in a mediate and indefinite process of reading, interpreting, and reinterpreting. In oral discourse, by contrast, the speaker and her intention are supposedly accessible immediately, without delay or distance, making it possible in principle to attain an “authoritative” interpretation of a discourse by asking the speaker to explain what she meant. Similarly, vocalized speech can be regarded as a material representation of an even more original “speech,” the voiceless λόγος of thought described in Plato’s Sophist, in which the soul communicates ideal meanings to itself immediately, without recourse to a material medium. This “internal λόγος” is typically conceived of as being independent of linguistic context; conventionality and context-specificity are introduced into discourse together with the materiality of vocal and written

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13 Derrida, De la grammaatologie, 15–31; Of Grammatology, 6–18.
Such phonocentrism is, for Derrida, the basic matrix underlying the distinction between material sign and ideal meaning—the signifier and signified of Saussurean structural linguistics—which in turn makes a “transcendental” signified, i.e., a final, absolutely universal referent, a plausible ideal. The metaphysics of presence, Derrida asserts, is characterized by a phonocentric “debasement of writing and its repression outside ‘full’ speech.” By contrast, “grammatology,” the new approach proposed by Derrida, is precisely the attempt to make explicit the ways in which writing exposes the radically (con)textual—i.e., irreducibly mediated and referential—way in which all discursive meaning is generated. No form of discourse is able to simply extricate itself from textuality. Put in another way, there is no pure signified; all discursive meaning is contaminated with a signifying element, a reference to something else.

“Ontotheology” is primarily a conceptual tool with which Heidegger seeks to delineate and demarcate certain underlying tendencies of the philosophical tradition up to, and including, Nietzsche. In a similar way, “logocentrism” is meant to capture an inherent feature of Western thought about discourse and meaning in the tradition up to, and including, Heidegger. Derrida notes that Heidegger’s project is incapable of simply abandoning the conceptual resources and the specific discursive structures of the tradition it tries to delimit, remaining to some extent conditioned by them, and that this incapacity is not a simple deficiency: there is no simple twisting free of the tradition. “To the extent

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15 In a classical passage of De Interpretatione (in Categoriae et Liber De Interpretatione, ed. Lorenzo Minio-Paluello [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949], 1.16a3–8 [hereafter, De Int.]), Aristotle maintains that written signs are symbols of vocal signs, which in turn are symbols of mental affects (παθήματα), these in turn being ways in which the soul conforms to real things (πράγματα). Whereas letters and vocal utterances vary in different languages, the mental affects they communicate (as well as, of course, reality itself) are the same for all. Cf. Derrida, De la grammatologie, 21–22; Of Grammatology, 10–11.


17 Derrida, De la grammatologie, 13–14; Of Grammatology, 4.
that . . . a logocentrism is not totally absent from Heidegger’s thought, perhaps it still holds that thought within the epoch of onto-theology. . . . This would perhaps mean that one does not leave the epoch whose closure one can outline.”18 Accordingly, there is an

. . . ambiguity of the Heideggerian situation with respect to the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism. It [sc., Heidegger’s situation] is at once contained within it [sc., the metaphysics of presence] and transgresses it. . . . The very movement of transgression sometimes holds it back short of the limit.19

In what follows, I will look at the complex relationship of inheriting, reaffirming, and filtering between Heidegger and Derrida in terms of this notion of logocentrism.

(1) I begin by arguing that in spite of their heterogeneous, suggestive, and aporetic character, Derrida’s readings of Heidegger do have a certain focal point—namely, the question concerning the very possibility of focal points, in other words, the problem of the unity and plurality of discursive meaning.

(2) This problem is seen to be especially prominent in Derrida’s detection of an inherently “logocentric” move in Heidegger’s interpretation of the Presocratic concept of λόγος as “gathering” (Versammlung) and in the latter’s constant reaffirmation of the primacy of gathering, concentration, and unity over dispersal and multiplicity.

(3) Even though Heidegger does not simply adopt or endorse the Greek concept of λόγος as such but, rather, transforms it in a decidedly non-Greek and postmetaphysical manner, he does indeed retain a certain notion of the unifying and focalizing function of discourse and language. This, I suggest, is the only kind of “logocentrism” that can properly be attributed to Heidegger. However, I

18 Derrida, De la grammatologie, 23–24; Of Grammatology, 12.
19 Derrida, De la grammatologie, 35; Of Grammatology, 22 (translation modified).
maintain that what is at stake here is a transformation, not an uncritical continuation, of the “ontotheological” logocentrism of traditional metaphysics.

(4) Turning to Derrida’s concession that a certain logocentrism is “philosophically necessary” and unavoidable, I will end by asking to what extent and at what cost the deconstructive abstention from looking for unifying centers of discursive meaning, or the active “dispersion” of such centers, is feasible. In other words, how far can the deconstruction of logocentrism be taken? Are not deconstructive readings, in the end, committed to a certain minimal “logocentrism,” a narrativity that no longer claims the status of metanarrativity?

1. **Narrative Unity: Heidegger’s Unthought?**

The feature that most clearly distinguishes Derrida’s deconstructive readings from more traditionally hermeneutical ones is their seeming lack of focus. Derrida refuses to follow the methodological tenet of Heideggerian hermeneutics, according to which “[e]very thinker thinks one only thought. . . . [F]or the thinker the difficulty is to hold fast to this one only thought as the one and only thing that he must think.”20 For Heidegger, reading texts of the metaphysical tradition involves mapping their “fundamental metaphysical position,” i.e., a specific point or situation within the general framework of the history of metaphysics around which the text or texts of a particular thinker can be grouped.21 Heidegger’s readings accordingly manifest a tendency to integrate texts into more and more comprehensive wholes, ultimately into what seems to be a kind of “master narrative” comprising the entire history of Western philosophy. However, he does this with a strong hermeneutical awareness that such a narrative is itself narrated from a particular historical

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situation and therefore relative to a particular context. While crediting Hegel with having produced “the only philosophical history of philosophy heretofore”\textsuperscript{22} and having thus challenged philosophy to think historically, Heidegger is careful to distinguish between the Hegelian metanarrative and his own. Hegel’s quest for an \textit{absolute} position with respect to the history of thought is for Heidegger an ultimately self-defeating venture to “jump over one’s own shadow” in which the constitutive finitude of thinking—i.e., the fact that in every thought, something is inevitably left \textit{unthought} in such a way that it is accessible as an unthought only from another standpoint—is, in a sense, shrugged off.\textsuperscript{23}

In contrast to Hegelian absolute teleology, Heidegger suggests that his own attempts, in the later phase of his career, to think being as \textit{Ereignis}, as the “event” or “taking-place” of meaningfulness, imply only a \textit{relative} teleology, the end of a \textit{particular} history. The “end of the history of being” that Heidegger speaks of in his latest texts is simply the end of the progressive unfolding of the different conceptual forms under which the metaphysical tradition has articulated being. This end signifies that it is no longer helpful to articulate \textit{Ereignis} in terms of “being,” since the traditional metaphysical connotations and limitations of this word are, as Heidegger acknowledges in his latest work, indissoluble.\textsuperscript{24} While Hegel concentrates on what was effectively \textit{thought} by the


thinkers of the tradition in order to dialectically bring their incomplete insights to a
definitive fruition, Heidegger’s attention centers on what these thinkers—as seen from his
particular position—implicitly presupposed but omitted to think. The Heideggerian
metanarrative is thus more modest than Hegel’s: it only incorporates the specific history of
a specific situation (its own), from the point of view of what, in that situation, is emerging as
something excluded by the tradition as it shows itself when considered retrospectively from
that situation. Heidegger’s narrative does not place itself above “history as such”; indeed, it
denies the possibility of any metahistorical vantage point. It may therefore not be
altogether appropriate to call it a metanarrative.

In this regard, Derrida is even more modest. During his philosophical career he
gradually became more and more cautious of all historical metanarratives and of narrative
structures in general, noting with reservation the presence of a “hidden teleology” or
“narrative order” in Heidegger. Suggesting, perhaps, a general impasse of narrativity
rather than a personal incapacity, he ironically asks: “I have never known how to tell a
story. . . . Why am I denied narration? Why have I not received this gift?” Derrida is
indeed remarkably reluctant to draw general conclusions from his readings or even to
summarize them, refusing to incorporate the texts he works with into a comprehensive and
systematic account. For the most part, he simply extracts from texts particular components
that generally appear to be “marginal” or relatively irrelevant in terms of what is normally


Constitution of Metaphysics,” 47–49.

Bennington and Rachel Bowlby as Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

27 Derrida, Mémoires pour Paul de Man (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 27; translated by Cecile Lindsay et al. as Memoires
for Paul de Man, revised ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 3. For an excellent discussion of
deconstruction “neither as a simple affirmation nor negation of narrative but rather as a radical perplexity in
the face of narrative,” see James Gilbert-Walsh, “Deconstruction as Narrative Interruption,” Interchange 38
taken to be the focal point of these texts, playing with their hidden connotations in order to disclose ways in which they precisely resist integration into a single coherent narrative. Derrida’s readings of Heidegger, for example, do not amount to a conventional interpretation of Heidegger’s work as a unified totality hinging on the author’s “fundamental intentions.” Their specifically deconstructive function is rather to expose in Heidegger’s writings implicit connotations of traditional commitments that Heidegger never explicitly subscribes to and thereby to reveal specific ways in which Heidegger’s actual discourse fails his integral project. For Derrida, this is not a contingent individual failure but rather a predicament of all discourse—including the philosophical, in spite of its inherent desire to be unequivocal. It is constitutive of the textuality of texts that they can never be harnessed, once and for always, to serve a single purpose. In a reading of Heidegger, a deconstructive operation involves showing how some of the components (phrases, idioms, or metaphors) of his discourse resist integration into the general logic of his thought and can also be construed to serve purposes that potentially conflict with his explicit project of opening up avenues for postmetaphysical forms of thinking.

This is Derrida’s particular tactic in the Geschlecht essays (1983–89), in Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question (1987), and also in his recently published last seminar on The Beast and the Sovereign (2001–3), which extensively studies Heidegger’s 1929–30 lecture course on The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics.28 A basic “point” of these commentaries is to exhibit the irreducible plurality of potential meanings present in the Heideggerian corpus. This point is made performatively, precisely by not explicitly making it, in order to

avoid the impression of an authoritative attempt by Derrida to impute a simple or total meaning to his own texts. In fact, Derrida suggests that the irreducible plurality of textual meaning is perhaps precisely the unthought element in Heidegger, or rather, his “unthoughts.” In a 1987 text titled “Desistance”—the word, retrieved from the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, refers to a breakdown or dispersion as a radical form of “resistance” to the logic of any discourse, a refusal to uphold its unequivocal consistency—Derrida mentions the Heideggerian “fundamental axiom according to which the un-thought of a thought is always single, always unique,” and goes on to ask:

What if Heidegger’s unthought . . . was not one, but plural? What if his unthought was believing in the uniqueness or the unity of the unthought? I won’t make a critique out of my uneasiness, because I do not believe that this gesture of gathering is avoidable. It is always productive, and philosophically necessary. But I will continue to wonder whether the very “logic” of desistance, as we will continue to follow it, should not lead to some irreducible dispersion of this “unique central question.”

From this perspective, Heidegger’s main traditionalism would be his methodological conviction that exposing certain inherent limitations of the metaphysical tradition could disclose a unified postmetaphysical perspective upon a single dimension disregarded by metaphysics. It is in this sense that the movement of transgressing metaphysics allegedly holds Heidegger within the confines of metaphysics. Derrida becomes increasingly sensitive to certain traditional commitments of the Heideggerian notion of the epochal history of metaphysics, in which every phase in the progressive unfolding of being as a certain kind of presence and in the corresponding withholding (Greek: ἐπέχειν) of a

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certain kind of non-presence is referred to a central “destiny” or “dispatch” (Geschick, envoi) of being.\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, Derrida is suspicious of the very notion of “history” as such, insofar as it implies, in the literal sense of the Greek ἱστορία, a teleologically structured narrative in which all elements ultimately come together.\textsuperscript{31} Why should the texts of particular thinkers or epochs be read as centralized totalities and subsumed under an even more comprehensive totality, such as the epochal history of being as metaphysics? Why should postmetaphysical thinking continue to be dominated by a unitary central perspective, such as the thinking of Ereignis, instead of embracing, with Nietzsche, an endless proliferation of new perspectives with continually shifting centers?

2. \textit{Λόγος} as Gathering: Heidegger’s “Logocentrism”

In his earlier writings, Derrida notes a certain ambivalence in Heidegger with regard to logocentrism and phonocentrism. On the one hand, Heidegger’s early formulations of the “ontological difference” between being (Sein) and beings (Seiendes) suggest vestiges of a Scholastic-Aristotelian view of being as a “transcendental” notion, i.e., one that is implied by all beings, insofar as they are determinate instances of “to be,” but is not itself anything determinate. This impression is seemingly corroborated by Heidegger’s characterization, in \textit{Being and Time}, of being as the “transcendens pure and simple.”\textsuperscript{32} Heidegger’s idiom is also full of associated auditory and oral metaphors, including references to a “voice of being.”\textsuperscript{33}


\textsuperscript{32}Heidegger, \textit{SZ}, 38; \textit{Being and Time}, 36.

Furthermore, the Heideggerian vocabulary of “originality” and “authenticity/properness” (Eigentlichkeit) suggests to Derrida a certain “archeo-teleology” in which “derived” and “improper” notions, concepts, or modes of being are supposedly to be referred to “original” or “appropriate” ideals. On the other hand, precisely the fact that being is not a being implies that the ontological difference cannot be an extrinsic and secondary relation “between” two determinate significations. Precisely in its radical otherness to determinate beings, being can no longer be conceived of as an “origin” in any traditional sense. The “voice of being,” for Heidegger, is not the immediate and living presence of a “meaning” of being but, rather, a mute and concealed, i.e., not directly accessible, “voice.”

In his Geschlecht essays of the 1980s, Derrida becomes increasingly sensitive to a recurrent word in Heidegger’s later work: Versammlung, “gathering.” Gathering, he notes in his habitual suggestive and aporetic tone, is always privileged by Heidegger over dispersion, diffusion, and apartness. Derrida takes pains not to draw hasty conclusions from this and does not pretend to derive any unequivocal concept of “gathering” from the heterogeneous occurrences of this expression in Heidegger’s text. Versammlung is not a magical key to all of Heidegger’s work, not a focal point around which all of his writings could be gathered: “Heidegger’s thinking is not simply a thinking of gathering.” What interests Derrida, rather, are the relative positions and functions of Versammlung in different Heideggerian contexts with regard to other associated expressions. Themes such as “locality” (Ort), “memory” (Gedächtnis), the “fourfold” (Geviert), and “spirit” (Geist) are all characterized by Heidegger in terms of noncritical privilege accorded in his works, as in the West in general, to the voice. . . . This privilege, whose consequences are considerable and systematic, can be recognized, for example, in the significant prevalence of so many ‘phonic’ metaphors. . . . Now, the admirable meditation by means of which Heidegger repeats the origin or essence of truth never puts into question the link to logos and to phōnē” (translation slightly modified).

36 “La main de Heidegger,” 439; “Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand,” 182. For a thorough discussion of this aspect of Derrida’s reading of Heidegger, see Marrati, Genesis and Trace, 87–113.
37 Derrida, Mémoires pour Paul de Man, 140; Memoires for Paul de Man, 146.
gathering and uniting—not simply in the sense of fusing or welding into a seamless homogeneous unity, but rather as the discovery of a shared complicated identity within heterogeneity and discord.\(^38\) Derrida thereby initiates a typical deconstructive move. Simply by registering the potential presence of a powerful and traditional hierarchical opposition (unity/plurality) at the heart of Heidegger’s work, he is already implicitly dislodging its self-evident and unequivocal character.

The importance of gathering for Heidegger becomes most manifest in his interpretations of the Greek concept of λόγος, notably of the “archaic” λόγος present in the Heraclitus fragments. Derrida pays special attention to this notion in the fourth and final essay of the Geschlecht series, “Heidegger’s Ear: Philopolemology” (1989), which follows the dialectic of friendship (φιλία) and strife (πόλεμος) in Heidegger. The later Heidegger again and again comes back to Heraclitus’ fragment B 50—“Having heard not me but λόγος itself, it is well-advised [σοφόν] to agree [ὁμολογεῖν]: All (is) One [ἐν πάντα]”\(^39\)—concluding that, for Heraclitus, “being [Sein] is gathering [Versammlung]—Lambda.”\(^40\) Insofar as λόγος, discursiveness, is the gathering articulation of determinate and differentiated beings, it is being itself.

Noting that Heidegger highlights precisely the unifying function of the Heraclitean

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λόγος, Derrida makes what seems to be an important modification to his notion of logocentrism:

At bottom logocentrism is perhaps not so much the gesture that consists in placing the λόγος at the center as the interpretation of λόγος as Versammlung, that is, as the gathering [rassemblement] that precisely concentrates what it configures.41

Heidegger’s interpretation emphasizes the role of λόγος as a differential and referential structure. Λόγος, he tells us in Introduction to Metaphysics, is essentially characterized by “strife,” πόλεμος, i.e., by the differentiation into binary opposites that generates individual articulate meanings (e.g., “gods” as opposed to “mortals,” “free citizens” as opposed to “slaves”) and is therefore, in the words of Heraclitus’ fragment B 53, the “sovereign” (βασιλεύς) and “father” (πατήρ) of all things.42 However, in what Derrida regards as the properly “logocentric” move of Heidegger’s interpretation, λόγος as πόλεμος is then brought back to a certain kind of “friendship” (φιλία) that gathers opposites into their original unity and belonging together.43 Rather than designating the centrality of λόγος in the sense of an ideal and central meaning, “logocentrism” now refers to the understanding of λόγος as the gathering of discourse around a center that reconciles difference and antagonism into an inner agreement and unison. Logocentrism in this qualified sense becomes problematic from the point of view of Derrida’s particular concerns in the 1989 essay, namely, the “politics of friendship” and a “democracy to come”—notions that would involve, he tells us, a kind of equality compatible with, and even inseparable from, an absolute singularity.44

However, it seems that Derrida’s problem with this form of logocentrism arises, in part, from his presupposition that the unifying gathering peculiar to λόγος excludes singularity and uniqueness. “The unique—that which is not repeated—has no unity since it is not repeated.

43 Heidegger, WIP, 13; What is Philosophy?, 49.
Only that which can be repeated in its identity can have unity.”

Singularity, says Derrida, “does not collect itself, it ‘consists’ in not collecting itself.” But what is this “consisting” that does not collect itself? I will try to question this particular notion, showing that the gathered unity of λόγος can, in fact, be construed precisely as a singular unity, even though this means taking a decisive step beyond Greek thought.

3. **The Singular Unity of the Postmetaphysical Λόγος**

Heidegger initially translates λόγος either as *Rede*, which does not mean simply “speech” but rather “discourse” or “articulation” and is cognate with the English verb “to read,” and later as *Lese*, which as a noun means “gathering” or “picking the harvest,” but also relates to the verb *lesen*, “to read,” and to *Lege*, “lay” or “placement.” Like the Latin *lego/legere*, “to read,” *lesen* and *legen* are cognates of the Greek λέγειν, the most concrete meaning of which is “(selective) gathering,” “picking out,” or “collecting.” What is the connection between λόγος, reading, and gathering? According to Thomas Sheehan, “‘[R]ead’ . . . translates what the early Heidegger (but not Derrida) meant by logos.” In the activity of reading, a multiplicity of written symbols, which in alphabetic systems have no intrinsic meaning but simply represent

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individual phonemes, are selectively collected—not by any active effort but, after one has learned to read, more or less automatically—into more and more comprehensive meaningful units: words, phrases, and sentences. As the formation of meaning through the selective combination of units into unified and articulated wholes, reading is gathering.

Heidegger’s early lecture courses devote much attention to Aristotle’s account of the complex structure of λόγος, defined in De Interpretatione as a meaningful linguistic utterance composed of inherently meaningful parts. What particularly interests Heidegger is Aristotle’s analysis of the predicative structure, captured with the formula “something as/of something” (τι κατὰ τινός), of the declarative assertion (λόγος ἀποφαντικός), i.e., the particular form of discourse capable of being true or false. Heidegger derives the declarative “as”-structure, which he takes to be characteristic of a theoretical statement primarily oriented to presence-at-hand or accessibility (Vorhandenheit), from the more primordial, temporally multidimensional “in-order-to”-structure of readiness-to-hand or availability (Zuhandenheit). Λόγος as a complex propositional unity is thereby referred back to the complex temporal unity of a practical situation. Heidegger also stresses the fact that Aristotle characterizes discursiveness in terms of a collecting that preserves apartness and articulation: the “something-as-something” structure of λόγος both connects (σύνθεσις) its elements and holds them apart (διάφεσις). As

51 Aristotle, De Int., 5.17a8–22.
such a differentiated unity, the Aristotelian λόγος points to the wide and rudimentary sense of
the word that Heidegger discovers in the Heraclitus fragments:

The Λόγος of which Heraclitus speaks is, as selection [Lese] and collection [Sammlung],
as the One that unifies all, . . . the original gathering [Versammlung] that preserves
[verwahrt] beings as the beings that they are. This Λόγος is being [Sein] itself, in which
all beings abide [west].

The Heraclitean λόγος, Heidegger maintains, is not primarily a human faculty, but rather
simply the formation of unified meaning from differentiated elements through a selective and
collecting gathering. However, the other central meaning of λόγος and λέγειν, “saying,
speaking out, telling,” is neither secondary nor derivative. On the contrary, λόγος is in itself a
discursive and linguistic gathering; even more, it is the very essence of discursiveness and
language. In an important and revealing passage, Heidegger tells us that λόγος is also the
basic narrative structure of discursiveness, i.e., the formation of consistent and “logical”
narrative meaning in the form of a “story” or “tale” (Sage), which precisely presupposes a
selective placing-together or “collocation” (Lege) of narrative elements.

Ὁ Λόγος, τὸ Λέγειν, is selective collocation [lesende Lege]. But at the same time λέγειν
always means for the Greeks to lay before [vorlegen], to exhibit [darlegen], to narrate
[erzählen], to tell [sagen]. Ὁ Λόγος then would be the Greek name for speaking as telling,
for language [Sprache]. Not only this. Ὁ Λόγος, thought as selective collocation, would
be the essence of the tale [Sage] as thought by the Greeks. Language would be the tale.
Language would be the gathering letting-lie-before [versammelnde Vor-liegen-lassen] of
what is present [Anwesenden] in its presencing [Anwesen]. In fact, the Greeks dwelt in this

54 Heidegger, GA 55, 278.
essence of language. But they never thought this essence—Heraclitus included.55

In other words, the very beginning of Western “logic” in Heraclitus, i.e., the emergence of the predominant role of discursive rationality as the internally coherent and consistent unity of articulate thought and experience, is inherently oriented by the narrative function of human language. However, the Greek thinkers, Heraclitus included, never explicitly regarded λόγος as language in the modern sense, i.e., as historically and culturally situated, constantly evolving, and context-sensitive discourse. On the contrary, language was conceptualized “logocentrically” as a derivative material and vocal representation of λόγος, as its culturally specific expression.

[Language came to be represented . . . as vocalization, φωνή, as sound and voice, hence phonetically. . . . Language is φωνή σημαντική, a vocalization which signifies something. This suggests that language attains at the outset that preponderant character which we designate with the name “expression” [Ausdruck].56

Dislodging this hierarchy between discursiveness and language—which Heidegger himself to a certain extent upholds in Being and Time in establishing discourse (Rede) as the foundation of language (Sprache) and the latter, in turn, as the “utteredness” (Hinausgesprochenheit) of discourse57—and understanding λόγος as inherently linguistic would therefore bring about a profound transformation with regard to the “logocentric” conception of the ideal and universal essence of discursiveness. The Heraclitean λόγος is absolutely universal. However, there is no universal language; there are only particular languages that constitute particular historical communities and the particular ways in which they experience meaningfulness.

“The” language is “our” language; “our language” not only as native language, but also as the language of our history. . . . Our history—not as the course of our destinies and accomplishments, known from historical accounts, but we ourselves in the instant [Augenblick] of our relationship to be-ing [Seyn].

When discursive meaningfulness is situated within such a linguistic framework, the absolute unity of λόγος turns into the more modest, temporally situated and contextual unity of a particular historical instant. This transformation is an integral part of what the later Heidegger refers to as the postmetaphysical “other beginning” of thinking:

That Greek interpretation of ὄν ᾗ ὄν [sc., being qua being] as ἕν [one], that heretofore unclear priority which oneness and unity have everywhere in thinking of being . . . . Seen more deeply, that unity is merely the foreground—seen from the vantage point of collecting re-presentation [sammelnden Vor-stellen] (λέγειν)—of presencing [Anwesung] as such . . . . Presence can be grasped as collection [Sammlung] and thus be conceived of as unity—and with the priority of λόγος must be so grasped. But unity itself is not of its own accord an originary and essential determination of the being of beings. . . . In terms of the other beginning, that unshaken and never questioned determination of being (unity) can and must nevertheless become questionable; and then unity points back to “time.” . . . But then it also becomes clear that with the priority of presence (the present) wherein unity is grounded, something has been decided, that in this most self-evident priority, the strangest decision [Entscheidung] lies concealed, that this decisive character indeed belongs to the abidance [Wesung] of be-ing [Seyns] and hints at the uniqueness [Einzigkeit], in each instance, and the most originary historicity of be-ing itself.

58 Martin Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 65: Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis) [1936–38], ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1989), 501 [hereafter, GA 65]; translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly as Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 353 (translation modified).
59 GA 65, 459–60; Contributions to Philosophy, 323–24 (translation modified).
For Heidegger, the unity of the Heraclitean λόγος as gathering is based on the ultimate primacy of the pure, absolute, and undifferentiated presence as such that unifies all particular beings. As Heidegger understands it, the Greek “first beginning” of the Western metaphysical mode of thought essentially consisted in the absolutization of pure presence, of the sheer fact of the intelligible accessibility of meaningful reality to (human) awareness, epitomized by Parmenides’ fragment B 3: “For thinking [νοεῖν] and being [εἶναι] are one and the same.”\(^{60}\) The result of this absolutization is the “purification” of presence of any references beyond itself, to any other-than-presence.\(^{61}\) However, such purification entails an implicit “de-cision” in the literal sense of a “cutting-off” of presence from the temporal background context in terms of which the present is encountered in concrete singular situations—in other words, an abstraction from the historical uniqueness (Einzigkeit) of meaningfulness. While the metaphysical tradition basically looked for the unity of being in the realm of radical transcendental universality, Heideggerian postmetaphysics would look for this unity precisely in the internal unity of every instance of meaningful presence, characterized by radical heterogeneity and irreducible singularity. The “essence” of things is no longer a universal identity shared by particular instances, but rather the singular situatedness of things in a context.

Within the domain of the leading question [sc. the Aristotelian metaphysical question concerning being qua being], . . . the essentiality of essence [Wesens] lies in its greatest possible generality. . . . When, by contrast, be-ing [Seyn] is conceived of as taking-place [Ereignis], essentiality is determined from the originality and uniqueness [Einzigkeit] of


be-ing itself. Essence is not what is general but rather precisely the abidance [Wesung] of uniqueness . . . in each instance.62

4. Contextual Centers: Narrativity after Logocentrism

Derrida’s main reservation concerning the notion of gathering as the basic function of discourse—namely, his suspicion that it precludes singularity and heterogeneity—thus begins to seem unwarranted. Heidegger’s rethinking of λόγος as Sage, “saying” or “tale,” as the narrative and textual, collecting, collocating, or “reading” function of language, regards discourse no longer as a gathering in the sense that it would refer all meaning back to an absolute, pure, or ideal presence but, rather, as a “gathering into Ereignis,”63 i.e., into the situational happening of meaningfulness in its singularity in which it always refers to a specific context. This linguistic transformation of λόγος is part of the process that Heidegger calls the transition (Übergang) to the other beginning, to the postmetaphysical perspective in which the differential relationship between presence and its context becomes constitutive of presence. The focal point of presence becomes irreducibly embedded in a context of non-presence and thereby relativized.64 As Sheehan puts it, using one of Derrida’s favorite expressions, meaningful presence becomes an irreducible trace—a trace of nothing, as it were, in the sense of the focus in a nexus of references to meaning-dimensions that always exceed what is presently “there” and can never themselves be made immediately present.

Reading is indeed the referral of ta onta [sc. beings] beyond themselves, but it is always a referral to no-presence; hence, always a referral of entities as traces-of-no-presence. . . .

62 GA 65, 66; Contributions to Philosophy, 46 (translation modified).
64 On the transition from the first beginning to the other, see Heidegger, GA 65, 171–88; Contributions to Philosophy, 120–32; GA 45, 124–27; Basic Questions of Philosophy, 108–11.
itself, to the . . . movement that is logos, the referring that refers to no-presence.\textsuperscript{65} 

This irreducible referentiality of discursive meaning is what Derrida himself articulates in the 1980 essay “Envoi”: “Everything begins by referring back \textit{par le renvoi}, that is to say, does not begin. . . . I do not know if this can be said with or without Heidegger, and it does not matter.”\textsuperscript{66} 

Derrida hesitates (and professes indifference) as to whether the radical kind of referentiality he has in mind remains within or goes beyond Heidegger’s scope. We should here take another look at Heidegger’s notion of ontological difference, especially at the way in which it is developed in \textit{Identity and Difference} (1957), a text that Heidegger himself considered one of the most lucid articulations of his main topics.\textsuperscript{67} 

For us, . . . the matter [\textit{Sache}] of thinking is difference [\textit{Differenz}] as difference. . . . what does it say, this being [\textit{Sein}] that is mentioned so often? . . . What do you make of difference if being as well as beings [\textit{Seiendes}] appear \textit{from difference}, each in its own way? . . . Insofar as being abides as the being of beings, as difference, as discharge [\textit{Austrag}], being grounds beings and beings, as what \textit{is} most of all, establish being.\textsuperscript{68} 

The word “being” seems to be used here in two distinct but overlapping senses:

(1) being as appearing \textit{from} (the ontological) difference; and


(2) being as this difference itself.

In the more narrow sense (1), being is the framework or context of a being but not a being in its own right, in other words, the frame of reference in which any particular presence is implicated but which is itself present only implicitly, never immediately as such. In this sense, both beings and being—i.e., the foreground of presence and its respective background context—appear "from" their reciprocal differentiation. In the more comprehensive formulation (2), however, being is this very differentiation, not as a relation between two pregiven relata but as a reciprocal "discharge" (Austrag)—identified by Sheehan as another name for λόγος— in which a determinate, context-specific being is "carried out" by its background context and thereby "discharged" or "delivered" into presence.70 Austrag, in this reading, is the contextual, differential, and referential happening of presence, the contextualization in which the focal point of presence is differentiated from, and at the same time inextricably intertwined with, a background that is present only in the references and traces that constitute the focus. Austrag is what Derrida designates as différence—a word that does not convey a difference "between" any pregiven identities but rather stands for a process of indefinite contextualization, referral, and deferral in which relative meaningful identities are constituted through a chain of references to further references that never lead to any ultimate reference point.71

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71 Derrida, “La différence” [1968], in Marges de la philosophie (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 13; translated by Alan Bass as “Différance,” in Margins of Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 13: “It is because of diference [différence] that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called ‘present’ element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself” (translation modified). However, Derrida also insists (“Implications,” 19; “Implications,” 8) that, as opposed to différence, the Heideggerian ontological difference is “in a strange way . . . in the grasp of metaphysics. Perhaps then, . . . we would have to become open to a diferance that is no longer determined, in the language of the West, as
As différence, as indefinite contextualization, being/Austrag/λόγος also unifies beings—not as some absolute reference point or “transcendental signified,” but rather in the way in which a text as a system of references interweaves its individual elements into an articulated texture. As Rede, Lese, and lesende Lege, Heidegger’s linguistic, post- or trans-Greek λόγος stands for the readability, textuality, and contextuality of meaningfulness—for the gathering of meaningfulness around a central focus which, however, is meaningful only as the focal point of a specific context. To read and to interpret is to gather a text around a focal point, some center or another; the very notion of “context” presupposes a center. Nonetheless, no reading can even in principle be definitive and no interpretation exhaustive. Texts always remain open to shifts of focus, reinterpretations, and recenterings.

Derrida’s famous and much-abused 1967 dictum, Il n’y a pas de hors-texte, “There is no outside-the-text,” which he much later translated to say, “There is no outside-context,” would thus be quite in concordance with the Heideggerian “logocentric” notion of the contextual gathering of meaning. As Jonathan Culler and David Wood put it, two central principles of Derridean deconstruction are the contextuality of meaning and the indeterminacy of every context. All meaning is inscribed in a configuration of background dimensions which, because of its heterogeneity and singularity, cannot be specified and identified. Or, in the formulation of Rodolphe Gasché, “inscription [i.e., becoming-textual, insertion into a text] contextualizes that which claims uniqueness and oneness. Deconstruction reinscribes the

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72 On the aptness of the word focus (Latin for “hearth”) for designating, in a Heideggerian framework, this kind of context-sensitive center, see Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 196–99.


74 Derrida, De la grammatologie, 227; Of Grammatology, 158. Spivak offers two alternative translations: “There is nothing outside of the text” and “There is no outside-text,” of which the latter is more literal.

origin into the context or text of its infrastructural possibilities.”76 There is no absolute origin, no reference point of meaningfulness that would rest beyond the endless meaning-generating play of references. There are only different possible focal points and context-specific centers. It is true that in his early texts, Derrida speaks of a post-logocentric “decentering” as a disappearance or loss of center.77 What is at stake, however, is not a loss of the notion of center as such, but rather its transformation, which entails abandoning the traditional aspiration to an absolute and permanent center:

[I]t was necessary to begin thinking . . . that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play.78

Derrida makes this especially clear in the 1966 discussion at Johns Hopkins related to the original presentation of “Structure, Sign and Play,” reacting to Jean Hyppolite’s assertion that one cannot think of a structure without a center, whether in the sense of general rules that allow us to understand the interplay of the elements of the structure or in the sense of certain elements which enjoy a particular privilege within the structure:79

Structure should be centered. But this center can be either thought, as it was classically, like a creator or being or a fixed and natural place; or also as a deficiency, let’s say; or something which makes possible “free play” . . . and which receives—and this is what we call history—a series of determinations, of signifiers, which have no signifieds. . . .

I didn’t say that there was no center, that we could get along without the center. I

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believe that the center is a function, not a being—a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable.\(^80\)

The center of discursively articulated meaningfulness is not a fixed and substantial point of reference but rather a function of discursiveness.\(^81\) Discursive thought and experience function by gathering their different elements around a focal point. This is also what we understand by the narrative function of discourse: “relating,” in the sense of narrating, literally means establishing a link between diverse past events and the present of narration, gathering them around the present. Moreover, just as Derrida emphasizes the “philosophical necessity” of the gesture of gathering, he is now emphasizing the “indispensability” of the narrative function. This means, perhaps, that there always already are narratives. The discursive nature of meaningfulness entails that meaning is always “told” meaning, i.e., integrated into a framework with a “point” or center that binds together the multiple references to a context. David Wood suggests: “[P]erhaps what we think of as the privilege of the same, of unity, of presence, is not the privilege of some autonomous value, but the privilege of a certain minimal framing.”\(^82\)

The effect of deconstruction is therefore not the simple abolition of narrativity or narrative structures. Deconstruction is, rather, the process through which narratives are constantly undone and replaced by others—the movement, intrinsic to discursiveness itself,


\(^81\) Cf. Clark, The Poetics of Singularity, 132: “For Heidegger . . . , there is a Versammlung, i.e., a force of unifying gathering whose rhythm pervades and determines the rest. For Derrida, however, there can clearly be no ‘centre’ in the sense of a uniquely decisive word or phrase . . . , but only verbal thickenings of a ‘secret’ syntax. . . . No interpretation can gather the secret or singularity of text under some summary heading without leaving some remainder.” However, I try to show that the Heideggerian “gathering” is just such a discursive “thickening,” an interpretive gathering that always leaves a remainder. See also Gasché, The Tain of the Mirror, 152: “The infrastructure is what knots together all the threads of correspondence among certain heterogeneous points of presence within a discourse or text. . . . As the medium of differentiation in general, it precedes undifferentiated unity and the subsequent bipolar division. It is a unity of combat.”

\(^82\) David Wood, Thinking after Heidegger (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 105. Wood is replying here to a suggestion by Christopher Fynsk, made in the context of a discussion in which Derrida himself participated, that there is a “kind of structural tendency in Heidegger towards reconstruction of the same. It is still one thing, in itself, still a certain oneness, or a certain privileged unity which is reaffirmed from beginning to end.” (David Wood, “Heidegger after Derrida,” Research in Phenomenology 17 [1987]: 115.)
that makes an ultimate or final master narrative impossible, since every narrative framework
can, in principle, be re-narrated from a new vantage point. This readiness for new narratives
and for retelling, Derrida notes, is precisely what coming to terms with the irreducible
referentiality of meaning and meaningful presence demands of us.

As soon as there are references [renvois], and they are always already there, something
like representation no longer waits and one must perhaps make do with that so as to tell
oneself this story [histoire] otherwise, from references to references of references, in a
destiny that is never guaranteed to gather itself, identify itself, or determine itself. . . .
This is the only chance—but it is only a chance—for there to be history, meaning,
presence, truth, language, theme, thesis, and colloquium.83