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Wittgenstein and Derrida on the Possibility of Meaning: Hierarchy or Non-Hierarchy, Simple or Non-simple Origin, Deferral or Non-Deferral

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Abstract: Meaning understood in terms of teachability and learnability is crucial to Wittgenstein's later work. As regards the resolution of philosophical problems – and epistemological problems in particular - this approach seems to posit a hierarchy of meaning that excludes endless deferral. This is the basis of Wittgenstein's attack on philosophical scepticism. Derrida's approach to language seems to require both non-hierarchy and endless deferral. Consequently fundamental to his concept of origin is identity and difference simultaneously, irreducibly, non-simply. One question is whether it is possible for there to be a compromise between the two philosophers: a hierarchy of meaning that does not in principle exclude endless deferral.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; Derrida; Meaning; Hierarchy; Deferral; Learnability; Teachability; Différance; Origin; Identity; Difference

INTRODUCTION

It cannot be gainsaid that both Wittgenstein and Derrida share a common preoccupation with language. Wittgenstein, especially the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, belongs to a specifically Austrian tradition of 'language-consciousness' traceable back - through one of his own contemporaries Karl Kraus - to the first half of the nineteenth century. This essentially literary tradition was combined in the *Tractatus* with the language of propositional and predicate logic, a language whose source could be traced back to another Austrian, Gottlieb Frege. (Frege's own intellectual context may be said to be the no less indigenous Austrian scientific tradition of the second half of the same century: the work of Brentano and his successor Ernst Mach at the University of Vienna. Brentano's guiding

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philosophical principle was *Vera philosophiae methodus nulla alia nisi scientia naturalis est*: the true method of philosophy is none other than that of natural science). If anything, the later Wittgenstein is even more focussed on language: instead of objective scientific language as the only meaningful language, it was now merely one of many. Wittgenstein now affirmed a plurality of 'language-games'.

What of Derrida in this respect? Language too is uppermost in his philosophy. His influences have been Nietzsche, Heidegger, and various forms of structuralist thought, especially that of the linguist Ferdinand Saussure. Derrida maintains that both phonetic and conceptual systems are systems of differences. What defines an 'a' as an a in a phonetic system is its difference from other phonemes within the system, rather than intrinsic characters of the sound. Derrida extends this insight to conceptual schemes. A concept is defined by its differences, hence a conceptual system is a system of differences. The concept a is defined in terms of everything else in the system, that which is not a, (a is precisely not-not a). (Though Derrida shares a common legacy with 'objective' structuralists such as Roland Barthes who also stands in the tradition of Saussure, Derrida's attitude to language is - in virtue of the method of deconstruction - commonly defined as post-structuralist. Wittgenstein as will be seen is a form of 'structuralism' in the broadest sense of the term.)

However, the shared concern Derrida has with Wittgenstein as regards language has seemed to go deeper than a mere common focus on language. It is not only that Wittgenstein affirmed a plurality of 'language-games', it is that he took this to mean that no one 'game' assumed priority over another. Here, it could be said, is a basic affinity with Derrida: Wittgenstein's conception of the relations between language games is decidedly non-hierarchical; Derrida's conception of deconstruction presupposes non-hierarchy in its very performance.

It seems to me that it is clear that Wittgenstein affirmed a plurality of language-games; what seems much more doubtful is the claim that he affirmed a non-hierarchical relationship between one language-game and another. Indeed, I would argue that Wittgenstein would have said that, to say that the relation between one language-game and another was either hierarchical or non-hierarchical, did not itself make sense. It was simply not the kind of thing one said of language-games: they could neither be said to justify or not justify each other. This becomes especially evident when we consider the examples of language-games that Wittgenstein actually gave. According to the list outlined in paragraph 23 of the *Philosophical Investigations* it seems clear that he meant by the term 'language-game', simple everyday activities such as: giving orders, and

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obeying them, reporting an event, forming and testing a hypothesis, etc.[1] He did not mean that science was one language-game, religion another, politics another, and so on, all existing in a non-hierarchical relationship.[2] I am not saying that this position is not valid; I am simply saying that it is unlikely that Wittgenstein held it.

That the above most accurately reflects Wittgenstein's conception of language-games - language-games can neither be said to be hierarchical or non-hierarchical as regards each other - does not rule out, and indeed allows for, a very interesting possibility. The way is open to argue that in the arguments of the later Wittgenstein there is, precisely, the pervasive presence of hierarchy. This is what I intend to do in what follows. I will suggest that there is a fundamental dissimilarity between Wittgenstein and Derrida on the question of hierarchy. Specifically, I wish to demonstrate that the later Wittgenstein's and Derrida's respective accounts of language - their respective philosophies of language if you will - cannot be rendered compatible. I will argue that one cannot without inconsistency affirm both Wittgenstein's critique of Cartesian scepticism and Derrida's deconstructive approach to language. The fundamental reason is that Derrida rejects hierarchy, Wittgenstein not. The reason for this is that the latter's dialectic employs a teachability-learnability criterion that is at the heart of his approach both to scepticism and to meaning *per se*. The paper essentially comprises of three sections. I first examine Wittgenstein's critique of Cartesian scepticism. Then I juxtapose Derrida's concept of différance and deconstruction. Following this I discuss the implications of Wittgenstein's critique of Descartes for his relation to Derrida. In the course of these sections I hope to show that: Wittgenstein's critique of Cartesian scepticism presupposes hierarchy; Derrida's deconstructive critique of language affirms non-hierarchy. I conclude from this that Wittgenstein and Derrida cannot be reconciled on the question of hierarchy. On the wider issue of whether the later Wittgenstein necessarily rejected the Derridian notion of endless deferral on the grounds that it precluded teachability and learnability of meaning *per se* I propose an 'agnostic' answer. I conclude that, while his position on matters epistemological in *On Certainty* appears to do so, the evidence in, for example, *Zettel*, on the question of language-learning *per se* is not necessarily clear-cut. This remains so even if the resources constituting teachability and learnability criteria necessarily originate in what Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life.' In a concluding section I explore the implications of my

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[1] Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, edited by G E M Anscombe, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1953).

[2] For a summary of the literature on this point, see Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1999), 64-66.

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framework for understanding the relation between Wittgenstein, Derrida and Descartes in the context of the history of ideas.

WITTGENSTEIN'S CRITIQUE OF CARTESIAN SCEPTICISM

Let me start with Descartes. Descartes' 'project of pure enquiry' was motivated by a desire to put the science of his day on a firm foundation.[3] As if in anticipation of the later Enlightenment philosophers who drew extensively from the legacy of the Greek and Roman ideals of classical antiquity,[4] Descartes' *Meditations* was influenced by the arguments of the ancient Sceptics and Sextus Empiricus in particular.[5] Descartes sought to establish - as against the Sceptics - truths about which there could not be the slightest doubt.[6] To this end, he began by rejecting as absolutely false everything which he should have the slightest cause to doubt. He 'doubts everything' until he reaches a proposition about which he cannot have the slightest doubt: a truth that is indubitable or absolutely certain. For Descartes, to say that one should only accept that about which one has not the slightest cause to doubt entails that one might be not be certain about anything: one might not know anything at all.

It is precisely on this point that Wittgenstein takes issue in the posthumously published *On Certainty*.[7] In order to conceive of the possibility of the meaningfulness of doubt one has to have a criterion of non-doubt - certainty - against which to measure what it is one conceives as doubt. "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get so far as doubting anything. The game of doubting

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[3] Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968), 95. See also J. L. Watling, "Descartes", in D. J. O'Connor (ed.), *A Critical History of Western Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 171.

[4] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* vol i (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1969), 9-10; 31-203.

[5] E. M. Curley, *Descartes Against the Sceptics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); R. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen: Van Goram, 1964), 172-192.

[6] The first of Descartes' *Meditations* is in fact a rehash of ancient scepticism. M. Burnyeat, "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed", in G. Vesey (ed.), *Idealism Past and Present.* Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series: 13. Supplement to Philosophy 1982 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 45.

[7] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, edited by G E M Anscombe and G H von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G E M Anscombe, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1969).

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itself presupposes certainty." (*OC* 115) "To be sure, there is justification; but justification comes to an end." (*Ibid*., § 192) "Doesn't testing come to an end?" (*Ibid*., § 164) Wittgenstein says "This statement appeared to me fundamental; if it is false, what are `true' or `false' any more?" (*Ibid*., § 514) It is not a question of having the right not to doubt, as if one's claim to know had justified one suspending one's willing faculty; rather, doubt only works in context of what it is to be certain about something - just as being wrong can only make sense against a criterion of what it is to be right, and just as miscalculating can only make sense against the criterion of a correct calculation. Justification - and criticism - comes to an end not because we reach rock-bottom facts about the external world which we know for certain, as, for example, the philosophical realist G. E. Moore thought, but because we reach some point beyond which our concepts become detached from: the criterion against which we measure what it means to know something does not exist; the criterion against which we measure what it means to know what it is to make a mistake about the existence of something ("I thought it existed, as for example, this does, but I made a mistake"); the criterion against which we measure what it means to doubt whether something is the case:

> The idealist's question would be something like this: "What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?" (And to that the answer can't be: I know that they exist.) But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works within a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?, and don't understand this straight off. (*Ibid*., § 24)

In what sense is it the case that "a doubt about existence only works within a language-game"? At *OC* § 52 Wittgenstein writes:

> [The] situation is not the same for a proposition like "At this distance from the sun there is a planet" and "Here is a hand" (namely my own hand). The second can't be called a hypothesis. But there isn't a sharp dividing line between them.
>
> But even though there is no sharp dividing line between them, it didn't follow, as Moore thought, that mistakes merely became increasingly improbable:
>
> For it is not true that a mistake merely gets more and more improbable as we pass from the planet to my own hand. No: at some point it has ceased to be conceivable.
>
> This is already suggested by the following: if it were not so, it would also be conceivable that we should be wrong in every statement about physical objects; that any we ever make are mistaken. (*Ibid*., § 54)

Wittgenstein then considers this possibility:

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> So is the hypothesis possible, that all the things around us don't exist? Would that not be like the hypothesis of our having miscalculated in all our calculations?

His answer to this question is given in the next paragraph:

> When someone says: "Perhaps this planet doesn't exist and the light-phenomenon arises in some other way", then after all one needs an example of an object which does exist. This doesn't exist, - as for example does .... (*Ibid*., § 56).

Wittgenstein's point is that to be able to conceive of the concept of non-existence in this example presupposes that one has a criterion of existence against which to measure it. One cannot affirm the non-existence of something without first having a means of measurement of what it is the non-existence of this something would be ("This doesn't exist, - as for example does ...."). Only when one has a criterion of what this something existing is can one judge whether this something does not exist. The Cartesian sceptic's belief that one could be mistaken about the existence of everything one ordinarily took granted comes to grief for precisely the same reason. The idea of the possibility of making a mistake every time is incoherent because knowing what it is to make a mistake presupposes knowing what it is not to make a mistake. Otherwise, we could not know what it is to make a mistake. Thus given the concept of making a mistake it is not possible that we are not certain about some things. Otherwise, we have no bench-mark against which to measure what it is to make a mistake.

Note what Wittgenstein is not saying. It is not that a person could not make a mistake, empirically speaking, every time! Wittgenstein accepts this as quite possible. His point is that knowing what it is not to make a mistake - knowing what it is to get it right - is presupposed even in this case just as it is in the case of someone who makes the occasional mistake. Otherwise we would have no criterion against which to measure his getting it wrong each time. Getting it wrong all the time presupposes a bench-mark of getting it right. In the *Meditations* Descartes uses the argument that one might be mistaken on every occasion about one's belief that there is a physical object (for example, a table) in front of one's eyes. In reality, being mistaken like this is no more powerful a proof for philosophical scepticism than being mistaken once.

The same strategy of argument occurs towards the end of *On Certainty*. Wittgenstein writes:

> Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc. -they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc.
>
> Later, questions about the existence of things do of course arise. "Is there such a thing as a unicorn?" and so on. But such a question is possible only because as a rule no corresponding question presents itself. For how does

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> one know how to set about satisfying oneself of the existence of unicorns? How did one learn the method for determining whether something exists or not? (*Ibid*., § 476).

One can only determine whether something exists or not (and therefore know what it is for something not to exist) if one already has a criterion - the means of measurement - of what it is something existing is. This of course is true of children who are very likely to go on and develop the relatively more sophisticated skill of asking about the existence of vampires, ghosts, aliens from outer space, legendary places, etc. The exchange "Do you know the way to Xanadu?" "No, Xanadu does not exist." is a meaningful exchange only on the assumption that one already knows there are 'things' that do exist. It could not be a meaningful one if it made sense to answer "Do you know the way to London? with: "I'm not sure London exists (because I'm not sure the external world exists)." For in that case one could have no criterion against which to measure what it is for Xanadu not to exist.

It is testimony to the importance Wittgenstein attaches to this argument that it is used in a similar epistemological context in *Zettel*.[8] Doubt is not a matter of will precisely because the distinction between getting the concept of doubt right and getting it wrong logically presupposes a pre-existing means of measurement, a metaphorical act of calibration on standard objects. Wittgenstein writes:

> How does it come about that doubt is not subject to arbitrary choice - And that being so - might not a child doubt everything because it was remarkably talented? (§ 409).
>
> A person can doubt only if he has learned certain things; as he can miscalculate only if he has learned to calculate. In that case it is indeed involuntary. (*Ibid*., § 410).
>
> Imagine a child was especially clever, so clever that he could at once be taught the doubtfulness of all things. So he learns from the beginning: "That is probably a chair."
> And now how does he learn the question: "Is it also really a chair?" (*Ibid*., § 411).

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[88] Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

> To begin by teaching someone "That looks red" makes no sense. For he must say that spontaneously once he has learnt what "red" means, i.e. has learned the technique of using the word. (*Ibid*., § 418).

In other words, to teach someone "That looks red" presupposes the person knows what it is red is: "`It looks red to me.' - `and what is red like?' `Like this.' Here the right paradigm must be pointed to." (*Ibid*., § 420) "Why doesn't one teach a child the language-game "It looks red to me" from the first? Because it is not yet able to understand the rather fine distinction between seeming and being?" (*Ibid*., § 422) No, because it first has to know what it is red is in order to have something against which to measure what it is that looks red. The former is the condition of learning or successfully teaching the latter. Put otherwise: one can doubt whether something looks red only if one already knows what it is that is red; the latter is the criterion against which the former is measured. Therefore doubt is not and cannot be a function of the human will; doubt cannot be a matter of choice; in this sense one is not free to doubt. One cannot will to doubt because one cannot, as a matter of logic, doubt anything and everything.

"If you tried to doubt everything you would not get so far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty." ?" (*Ibid*., § 115) Certainty about what? Norman Malcolm attributes to Wittgenstein the view that: "Certain propositions belong to my `frame of reference'. If I had to give them up, I shouldn't be able to judge anything."[9] As Wittgenstein puts it himself: "... the questions we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt." (*OC*, § 341) Again, he writes: "To be sure, there is justification; but justification comes to an end." (*Ibid*., § 192) And again: "Doesn't testing come to an end?" (*Ibid*., § 164) On G. E. Moore's claim to know certain fundamental facts such as he has two hands Wittgenstein writes: "Moore does not know what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him." (*Ibid*., § 151) Examples of propositions Wittgenstein cites as `standing fast' are: `I know that I am a human being', `I know I have a brain' (*Ibid*., § 4), `The earth existed long before I was born' (*Ibid*., § 233), `I believe I have forebears, and that every human being has them'. (*Ibid*., § 234) The importance of such propositions is that they - or propositions like them - constitute the metaphorical means of measurement against which, and only against which, one's use of the concept of doubt can be measured for correct usage, can be measured in terms of getting it right as opposed to getting it wrong.

Wittgenstein's key argument against philosophical scepticism, whether it be about epistemology, or meaning itself, is that scepticism can only make sense

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[9] N. Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief", in Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 74.

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against a pre-existing criterion of measurement or comparison. Philosophical scepticism is in error since it presupposes that one's judgements can make sense outside of such a criterion of measurement. Wittgenstein's critique is, at bottom, based on the observation that, in the act of doubt or criticism, the philosophical sceptic attempts to 'measure' - criticise - a very distinctive object of measurement, namely: the object of measurement that constitutes the means of measurement, and therefore a condition, of the meaningful employment the concept of doubt itself. In order to doubt, the sceptic must presuppose that which he or she doubts. The specific truths which the sceptical philosopher wishes to doubt are exactly what cannot be doubted, are exactly what must first be presupposed. This is essentially why Wittgenstein made a connection between meaning and teaching. When he asks, "Am I making the connection between meaning and teaching?" (Z § 411), the answer must be, absolutely! Teachability and by implication learnability – both closely linked to the concept of practice - is central to the later Wittgenstein's account of meaning. Just as scepticism was only warranted in a context in which one could say what it would mean to be certain about something, scepticism or doubt as a conceptual skill could only be taught and learned after one has learned more basic conceptual skills regarding criteria of truth and certainty.

DERRIDA'S ENDURING MOTIF OF 'UNENDING' DEFERRAL BETWEEN IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

It is fair to say that Derrida never countenances such a structure or such a determinate origin in his approach to meaning. In contrast to the later Wittgenstein he presents a picture of a subject who is enfolded in language which he can neither oversee (nor control) nor escape. The Derridian insight into the illusions of the philosophies of "presence" opens the way to endless free play, unconstrained by a sense of allegiance beyond this freedom. Derridian deconstruction claims to undo certain hierarchical distinctions, such as that between abstraction and concrete experience, misreadings as against true readings, confusion versus clarity, and the like. The general method is to show that the traditionally privileged terms depends on, is a special case of, the 'lower' one, e.g. that all readings are misreadings. There is a Nietzschean background here, but here is also a liberationist attempt involved in it. The undermining of hierarchies seems to open up the possibilities for a world of equals. But the possibility of affirming such a world is undercut by the fact that deconstruction cannot come to an end: deferral of the end and endless play are everything. For

Derrida there is nothing but deconstruction, which swallows up the old hierarchical distinctions between philosophy and literature, and between men and women, but just as readily could swallow up equal/unequal, community/discord, uncoerced/constrained dialogue, and the like. Nothing emerges from this flux worth affirming, and so what in fact comes to be celebrated is the deconstructing power itself, the prodigious power of subjectivity to undo all potential allegiances which might bind it and oppose pure untrammelled freedom.

Put like this, it may be argued that Derrida's postmodernist philosophy implicitly attaches too much value to the subjectivist self-celebration of the creative imagination: such celebration of the endlessly deferring creative self must mean endlessly deferral and, hence, moral default on the question of opposition to the coercive power of, for example, Fascism. This is essentially a moral criticism. Terry Eagleton has made a similar criticism in his book *The Illusions of Postmodernity*.[10] This seems to me far too simplistic. Derrida has a profound philosophical statement to make. What is fundamental to origin or the criterion or the measure or the paradigm-case of meaning is identity and difference simultaneously, irreducibly, non-simply then. This means deconstruction and différénce are unavoidable principles of philosophical enquiry.

To say that everything exists "différantly" is to say that everything exists without hierarchy. Différance is the condition of being according to which "there is no experience of pure presence, but only chains of differential marks" (Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 10). Derrida expressed himself in terms of this neologism because it uniquely expressed the perspective that presence is always experienced as difference itself and defers to what is non-identical with itself and in relation to itself. Because of this Derrida held the deferral to be endless, and as a consequence classical equilibrium in ontology and epistemology was beyond our grasp, therefore impossible,. In answer to the question, whether différance is 'the God of negative theology', Derrida famously (or infamously) replied, "It is and it is not. It is above all not."[11] In other words différance is the condition of possibility both of difference and identity but

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[10] T Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1992), 32.
[11] 'The Original Discussion of *Différance*', in David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (eds), *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985), p. 84. See also Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. Ken Frieden, in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 74.

difference is not in a hierarchical relationship with identity where it occupies a subordinate position. Origin is characterized by identity and difference simultaneously:

> 'What we note as différance will thus be the movement of play that "produces" (and not by something that is simply an activity) these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the différance which produces differences is before them in a simple and in itself unmodified and indifferent present. Différance is the non-full, non-simple "origin"; it is the structured and differing origin of differences. (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B Allison. Preface by Newton Garver [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). 141).

Origin can only exist as original identity *and* original difference. Derrida's concept of the trace means that 'words and concepts only receive meaning in sequences of differences' (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976], 70). Hence on the question of the origin of meaning Derrida says that 'a meditation on the trace should teach us there is no origin, that is to say, simple origin; that the questions of origin carry with them a metaphysics of presence (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 74). In terms of simple origin he quotes Antonin Artaud approvingly: 'It is that there has never been an origin' (Derrida, 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978] 292). Hence, insofar as origin coincides with identity it cannot shut out original difference. In *Writing and Difference*, in his essay on Hegel and Bataille, he writes:

> It is not a question of subordinating the slidings and differences of discourse, the play of syntax, to the entirety of an anticipated discourse. On the contrary. If the play of difference is indispensable for the correct reading of the general economy's concepts, and if each must be reinscribed within the law of its own sliding and must be related to the sovereign operation, one must not make of these requirements a subordinate moment of a structure. […] … one must not submit contextual attentiveness and differences of signification to a *system of meaning* permitting or promising an absolute formal mastery (Derrida 'From Restricted to General Economy', *Writing and Difference*, 345).

Finally and famously Derrida writes in the essay 'Différance':

> Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the différance of the other, as the other different and

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> deferred in the economy of the same… (Derrida, 'Différance' *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. and annotation, Alan Bass [Brighton: Harvester Press; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982]' 17).

A metaphysics of presence is a hierarchical structure with subordinate categories of one kind or another. Derrida opposes this possibility unconditionally. Wittgenstein seems to say that without hierarchical structure – without presence of this kind - doubt is impossible and by extension teaching and learning is impossible. The teaching and learnability conditions of meaning require structure and presence.

WIITGENSTEIN AND DERRIDA: A POSSIBLE COMPROMISE?

In other words, according to Wittgenstein one cannot collapse hierarchies in the way Derridian deconstruction proposes. Wittgenstein's argument against Descartes is essentially, that in the realm of language, hierarchies that undermine the Cartesian ego are unavoidable.. This seems directly to contradict Derrida. Derrida says that there are no hierarchies, hence no hierarchies of the form is/seems to be or is/is probably. Wittgenstein says that unless there are hierarchies of the form is/seems to be and is/is probably, a child could not learn the meaning of 'probably' or 'seems to be'. But since a child does learn these differences – and learning these differences depend on hierarchies - Derrida must be mistaken in some way.

That child-learning must conform to just such a sequence of events (the meaning of 'is' is learned before 'seems to be') is not a law to be corroborated by empirical observation. Rather, it demonstrates a purely conceptual point, which is: to teach the meaning of, for example, 'seems to be' in any context other than one in which 'is' has already been taught is necessarily not to have taught the meaning of 'seems to be' (whatever it is one has taught, it is not the meaning of this phrase). In other words, in the area of child-learning in which Wittgenstein connects meaning with learnability, identity must logically (and hence developmentally) precede difference. In other words, contra Derrida, Wittgenstein may affirm difference but he cannot affirm non-hierarchy. There exists a kind of genetic epistemology in the later philosophy that has parallels with Piaget's theories of child development in which certain principles have first to be in place before one can attempt to master the next stage. The inscription that Wittgenstein had intended to preface the *Investigations*, *King Lear's* 'I'll teach you differences' is not meant to challenge the ontological and epistemological priority of truth over false, certainty over doubt, 'is' versus 'appears to be' (the case). It is intended precisely to highlight differences that in a learnability context

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necessarily originate in identity. That is: a child can learn the conceptual skill characterized by 'what seems to be the case' only if he or she have first learned the conceptual skill of 'what is the case.' In a slightly different vein Donald Davidson held that communication and interpretation is impossible unless most of our beliefs are true. This of course is why it has been pointed out many times that the very possibility understanding Derrida's philosophy presupposes the priority of identity over difference (so for example one of the principles communication depends on is 'not both A and not-A [-(A & -A)], the principle of non-contradiction; otherwise it breaks down rather radically when applies to any assertion at all anyone makes).

That Wittgenstein rejects non-hierarchy then is clear enough. What is not so clear whether he also holds that hierarchy necessarily contradicts endless deferral. Clearly some measure of deferral is not inconsistent with the presence of hierarchy: there is a clear sense in which one can say in the Derridian idiom that one defers from 'seems to be' to 'is'. Endless deferral is another matter. In *On Certainty*, as we have seen, Wittgenstein seems to conclude as regards epistemological problems that necessarily `Justification comes to an end'. In other words, in the realm of epistemology it would seem that he is not only against non-hierarchy but also against endless deferral. In the remarks taken from *Zettel* on the matter of language-learning *per se*, it is again clear that Wittgenstein rejects non-hierarchy; it is less obvious whether he would exclude endless deferral unless it is shown that it precludes teachability and learnability *per se*. That 'is' is superordinate to 'seems to be' does not necessarily exclude deferral beyond 'is.' Or at least one cannot known this *a priori*. More significantly, one cannot second-guess what initial conceptual conditions are necessary and/or sufficient to reach the outcome where a child can use the concept 'is' correctly. In this sense normative epistemology may not be a universal model of language-learning itself. As long as teachability and learnability are not in principle precluded by an endless chain of deferral there is little practical use in pronouncing unconditionally on this issue. To be sure, in order to demonstrate to the Cartesian sceptic the error of their ways Wittgenstein has to posit both the necessary presence of hierarchy and an end to epistemic deferral; but as regards language-learning it is a moot point whether he has to affirm the end of deferral once one reaches the meaning of, for example "This is red". His position on language-learning would seem to entail that any such deferral beyond this point would of necessity face at least one constraint: any deferral that undermined hierarchy would be impermissible. But this does not of itself rule out something akin to endless deferral. To repeat: in order to refute the Cartesian sceptic, it is sufficient for Wittgenstein to claim that there is a hierarchy involved in is/seems to be or is/probably is; he does not have to claim that 'justification comes to an

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end' as regards teaching of learning the meaning of the demonstrative sentence, "That is a chair". That is a different kind of claim i.e. an non-epistemic claim.

CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

What should we conclude about the relation between Descartes, Wittgenstein, and Derrida as regards the history of ideas? Wittgenstein's later philosophy, as Brian McGuinness puts it, 'exposes the weaknesses of traditional philosophies by a method which is itself a subtle differentiation of traditional philosophy.'[12] If one can take for granted Descartes as a representative of early modern philosophy, this would seem to imply that Wittgenstein's philosophy is a merely (though this should not be taken in any pejorative sense) a phenomenon of late modernity. His philosophical technique is decidedly not post-modern. That is, Wittgenstein uses rational argument of a qualitatively different kind from Descartes' to refute him. He does not dispense with philosophical criticism *per se* but uses it to show that certain truths are exempt from philosophical criticism. This understanding of Wittgenstein would seem to concur with my own conclusions in this paper. What makes Wittgenstein and Descartes modern is that both affirm hierarchy. The fundamental difference between the two thinkers is the direction of hierarchy. Essentially, Wittgenstein reverses Descartes' hierarchy. This is not an original conclusion but it is worth rehearsing in the context of my argument. In his *Meditations* Descartes wrote:

> ... I am the same being who senses, that is to say who apprehends and knows things, as by the sense-organs, since in truth I see light, hear noise and feel heat. But it will be said that I am dreaming. Let it be so; all the same, at least it is very certain that it seems to me that I see light, hear a noise, feel heat; and this is properly what in me is called perceiving ....[13]

An idea is "that which the mind directly perceives".[14] Consequently, though one has incorrigible knowledge of one's own inner mental phenomena, one does not

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[12] B F McGuinness, "Editor's Preface", McGuinness (ed), *Wittgenstein and His Times*, iii.

[13] Descartes, *Meditations* II, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1968) 107.

[14] Descartes, `Reply to the Third Set of Objections to the *Meditations*', No 5. Quoted in A Kenny, "Descartes on Ideas" in W Doney, *Descartes*, (New York, MacMillan, 1967), 239.

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have such knowledge of the external world. Descartes aimed to show `how it is easier to know the mind than the body': "I see a tree" can be doubted without contradiction but not "I seem to see a tree". The argument is that what is certain is what seems to be the case - and that what is less certain - what is the case - can only be made certain if it is derived from (or presupposed by) the former. The error of this, according to Wittgenstein, is that it posits an impossible hierarchy, a hierarchy that does not and cannot be realised in any language but an unlearnable one. In essence, Descartes puts things the wrong way round. It is not possible to take as one's point of departure what seems to be the case , and from that point to attempt to derive what is the case. Rather, what it is x is is the criterion against which to measure what it is seems to be x is. If you like, in a certain sense the objective is the criterion against which the subjective must be measured.

Hierarchy seems to be a defining characteristic of modern thought, non-hierarchy a defining moment of post-modern thought. In the context of epistemology both Wittgenstein and Descartes affirm hierarchy or structure. But if we put this in the language of foundationalism there is a difference: Descartes is a factual foundationalist and Wittgenstein is a conceptual foundationalist. Descartes doubts everything until he arrives at a rock-bottom fact about which he cannot have the slightest doubt - his own existence as a thinking thing. Wittgenstein argues that in order to doubt in the first place certain truths must already be in place, otherwise the concept of doubt would be an empty one. In contrast an enduring philosophical motif of Derrida is the rejection of hierarchy and structure, and by implication the repudiation of the presence of simple origin. As regards hierarchy then, it does not take much to work out that we have two moderns (one early and one late) and one post-modern. Clearly both Wittgenstein and Descartes reject endless deferral in the context of epistemology. It is on the matter of the 'linguistic turn' in twentieth-century philosophy that things are more complicated. It is not obvious that even while espousing hierarchy in the field of language-learning Wittgenstein would reject endless deferral (Derrida I think it is fair to say would be enthusiastic about its presence). In other words, it is not clear whether foundations of the kind predicated of epistemology have a similar necessary role to play in meaning.