

ANTI-POSTMODERNIST PAPER #1

SEEMSTHAT:

On Going Beyond Presence and Text

I.

Poststructuralism claims that the meaning of a sign arises from differences with other meanings. According to this view, a sign does not have a meaning by virtue of its reference to, or other relations to, something non-linguistic. Rather, meaning arises from a system of contrasts, or differences. This view of meaning is especially prominent in deconstructive discourses, whenever words are claimed to derive their meanings (if any) only from other words and from the differences, or Derridian differances, which create meaning.

The idea that signs have their meaning from other signs -- either by way of difference and/or by way of interdefinition, intertextuality, etc. -- is (supposed to be) in contrast with the view that signs derive their meanings from something extralinguistic -- as by making reference to objects in an objectively real world.

In this note, I will show how this contrast collapses under its own weight.

II.

Language, as pictured by structuralism and poststructuralism (and it is indeed *pictured* by them), is comprised of a system of structures. Structuralism/poststructuralism takes language and understands it in this way. Yet one may ask, What is language like before it is *taken* in this way? Language comes before structuralist and poststructuralist language. What, then, is language -- as distinguished from (contrasted with) the structural *conception* of language, language as posited for study in a structuralist/poststructuralist discourse?

Language expresses lived experience. Deconstruction, of course, finds fault in this statement, because the word "experience" is supposed to lead into a metaphysics of presence for experience. But the statement can be read differently, so as to lead to a different outcome.

Setting aside (bracketing, crossing out) "conscious experience," and all cognate concepts of Experience as *something* (for example, Hume's "impressions," analytic philosophy's "sense data," also representations, qualia, etc.), it is possible to speak of a *way things seem*. Things seem this way; things seem that way. It even is possible to speak of how things seem, without speaking of a "way" things seem (set aside "ways" along with "impressions," etc.). "It seems that there is a vase." "It seems that something is moving." "It seems that it is cold in here." "It seems that there is a text."

This kind of writing, or speech, is free of many pretenses. It does not pretend to be "about" something called "how things seem." It does not pretend to be about a "subject of experience"; it proposes no reference to such a subject. It does not pretend to be about how things seem "now," in the "present"; there is nothing of "now," "present," in it -- but also nothing of "then." Just what seems to be the case, to be, to happen. No matter whether or not anything is the case, or is, or happens.

A statement of this kind, a "seems that" statement, does not contain or implicate a metaphysics of presence. It is as much in absence as in presence. The "object," the "event," the that-which-appears, recedes into absence. The "subject," the "observer," the that-which-is-appeared-to, recedes into absence. (Or these never were "present" to begin with?) Even the "experience," the so-called appearance or datum, is absent; hence there is no Descartes-reminiscent or Husserl-reminiscent metaphysics of appearance. A sign like "It seems that there is a vase" resounds with these absences, if read not as a statement about a vase (what vase is implicated here? an imaginary one? *whose* vase?) or about anything, but as follows: "IT SEEMS THAT there is a vase."

Vase or no-vase? Real vase or apparent vase? Presence or absence? (Or shall we avoid such questions?) The sentence collapses these distinctions within its own horizon. "IT SEEMS THAT there is a vase." Nothing more!

And cross out the "IT." There is no it, no-thing, to be suggested here. "IT-SEEMS-

THAT there is a vase" is not a sign of any presence that is not also absence. There is no "IT" that "SEEMS THAT." So "IT SEEMS THAT" might be replaced by a sign with less of this trace of the metaphysics of presence. The placing in play of the new word, "seemsthat," may be called for by the situation. (Or is it a lack of situation?)

III.

"Seemsthat there is a vase."

Vase or no-vase, "is" (being, appearance) or no-"is" -- but "SEEMSTHAT there is a vase."

Experience or no-experience. Consciousness or no-consciousness. There or no-there.

But "SEEMSTHAT there is a vase."

Sentences beginning with "seemsthat" have this peculiar feature: They are as much in absence as in presence. All presence may be ignored, bracketed, crossed out: the presence of Object, of Subject, of Experiences, of Consciousness. The existence of none of this is contained in "seemsthat" -- not even the existence of *appearances*, of data or impressions.

"Seemsthat there is a vase" cannot be said or written in the same way as "It seems to

me now that there is a vase." There is no pointing to me, to it, to now. No pointing to anything at all. Just this sentence: "Seemsthat there is a vase."

Statements (signs) like this stand apart from any presence. So are they signs? Does it matter whether they are signs, or merely -- *seemsthats*?

IV.

Just as "seemsthat" does not encompass the presence of any-thing, so also it does not point to anything itself. There is nothing, no object, no phenomenon, called "seemsthat." Seeming does not require presence; it is as much presence as absence. (Does it at least *seem* like presence? That is a totally different, albeit contrasting, question.) And it is not necessary to understand what (or whether) seeming "really is" to understand the meaning of "seemsthat."

Someone could claim to understand "Seemsthat there is a vase" in any of the following ways:

- there is a representation of a vase in someone's soul; (*dualism*)

- there is information about a vase in someone's brain; (*materialism*)

- people behave in certain ways; (*behaviorism*)

- certain language games are played, and "Seemsthat there is a vase" is a good move in this game; (*Wittgensteinianism*)

- "Seemsthat there is a vase" has a place only in certain discourses, made possible by a web of difference; (*deconstruction?*)

... or any number of other presumed "grounds" which someone might take as reasons for asserting "Seemsthat there is a vase."

Nevertheless, it is possible to ignore all these "grounds" and still sincerely say "seemsthat"! Any one of the above "grounds" might, for all one cares, be a good reason for asserting "Seemsthat there is a vase." Any one of these understandings of "seemsthat" might, for all one knows, be adequate or right in some way. (Though here, as in coffeemaking, "grounds" may be only the residue of what makes one awaken.) Yet all this is impractical for the use of "seemsthat" in lived language. It is not necessary to know what seemsthat "really means" (whatever that means!), or what (if anything) could make it the case that "Seemsthat there is a vase" (if anything can "make" that, like one makes a vase!)

Seemsthat: a sign (if it is a sign) not confined by presence or by absence; a sign that begins statements which, by positing nothing, remain *independent* of all the suppositions and positings of any text -- and hence reach beyond texts and discourses,

delineating a frontier that is both factual and independent of texts. This frontier is what is familiarly, though somewhat misleadingly, called *how things seem*. Because of its very lack of presence, it is an extratextual fact.

CONCLUSION

Utterances that begin with *seemsthat* -- commonly called *statements about how things seem* -- have a truth, a factuality, independent of any discourses or texts. Such utterances undo the poststructural stance that signs do not have their meaning from a reality independent of language. *There is an extralinguistic factuality, and hence an objective reality, regardless of any discourses or texts.*

Any utterances that depend upon *seemsthat* utterances for their factuality -- the “objective facts” that follow from the “subjective facts” -- also have a truth independent of any discourses or texts.

CODA: On the Purpose of This Document

(or, Why Did Mark Write This? I Thought He Was a Logician!)

When I wrote this document, I deliberately used language and concepts associated with postmodern thought. This is not the way I usually write. Here is why I did it.

This document is a re-expression, in postmodern language, of an idea that I proposed

in my earlier writings (*From Brain to Cosmos* and “How Subjective Fact Ties Language to Reality”). The gist of the idea: By examining facts about how things seem (which I called subjective fact statements), we find that there is an *objective reality* that defies the relativism of philosophical moves like deconstruction. Postmodern thought cannot succeed in doing away with subjective facts. Hence postmodern thought cannot do away with the objective reality whose existence the subjective facts support. In short, postmodern relativism is wrong. (Hence the headline “Anti-Postmodernist Paper #1.”)

The purpose of the present document is to show that this same conclusion can be drawn *within the framework of postmodern concepts and language*. Thus, postmodernists cannot argue effectively that my argument for objective reality is an artifact of analytic philosophy. One might say it is an *extrastylistic* truth -- not an artifact of one single style of philosophy.

The postmodernists are stuck with objective reality, just like the rest of us!

-- Mark F. Sharlow