Introduction:

Order/Logos: As we'd discussed in class, it is important to remember that the very basis of civilizational living is the concept of order, or logos, that is created by the creation of binaries (water/land, earth/heavens, black/white, light/dark and so on). Also understanding the concepts of signifier and signified as discussed in the lecture. Moving on from there, we discuss the essay.

Keywords and Explanations:

Structure

Very broadly, on Derrida's account in the essay 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', the concept of structure has been thought of in two ways, corresponding (very roughly) to two historical phases. Before Nietzsche – going all the way back to Plato – structure was conceptualized in terms of 'a center' or by 'referring it to a point of presence, a xed origin' (WD, 278). Following Nietzsche's critique of the metaphysics of truth (and then Freud's of the metaphysics of the self, Heidegger's of the metaphysics of presence–the list is partial; the 'history' potted), the 'earlier' concept of structure gave way, slowly and without organization, to a new or modified concept of decentred structure that came to be associated with what became known as structuralism. In terms of disciplinary or institutional inuence, the two most important figures in the formation of this 'new' concept of 'decentred' structure are Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. While Derrida begs to differ differently with these two, it may be said that his general problem with the structuralist version of structure is that it remains, despite appearances and affirmations to the contrary, an all too familiar metaphysics.

So the structuralist concept of decentred or even, as it were, 'structureless' structure is not the same as the 'Platonic' version of structure, but neither is it wholly different. For structuralism, any differences between say Platonic structure and Nietzschean structure would be effects of a larger system of structural differences, whether in the form of Lévi-Strauss's structure of 'the' human mind or Saussure's langue as a rule-governing system of differential relations. On this model the difference between 'centred' and 'decentred' structure (or between any binary opposition) is generated from an overarching or underlying structure of differences between 'nonpositive' terms (Saussure, Course, 120). There is no question that this represents an attempt at thinking 'difference' differently, outside the limits of a 'pure' or 'natural' occurrence between things in themselves (as originary moments or ahistorical events, for example). No doubt this is what lent structuralism its 'scientific' appeal, leading also to much controversy (see Lucy, 'Structuralism'). Yet for all that structuralism thinks past nature as the bedrock on which differences are grounded, it cannot let go of an idea that differences must be grounded on something, that there must be some- thing underpinning differences which in itself is centred and centering – in a word, full of presence. For structuralism, of course, that something is structure. So it may be said that structuralism remains, after all, a familiar metaphysics, because it fails to ask the question, What is the structure of structure? Or, which amounts to the same, it

never asks after the 'structure' of presence. This – an uncritical adherence to the 'anteriority' of presence – shows through for instance in Saussure's repetition of the standard conception of writing as a supplement to speech. In Saussure's words, speech and writing are 'two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the rst' (cited in OG, 30). As with Rousseau, spoken language is primary and natural for Saussure, who treats writing as a kind of costume or parergon which, in representing speech, also misrepresents it: 'Writing veils the appearance of language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise' (cited in OG, 35). The structure of Saussure's version of the speech–writing opposition is determined therefore by the originary structure of 'the natural bond' located in the indivisible unity of sense and sound, or between signified and phonic signier. But for the structure of the spoken sign to be 'non-representational' (indivisibly prior and natural), writing has to be put on the side of 'the post' (determined by, derived from, secondary to), as something that comes after speech only to (mis)represent it. Yet the structure of this opposition never quite works as Saussure (and many others, including Rousseau and Plato) would ideally like it to work. The trouble lies in associating speech with presence and writing with re-presentation. This of course makes it look as though speech comes first. In so far as writing could be said to be representation's first name, however, then in fact writing must come before speech, since it is only from within representation (within 'writing') that it is possible to conceive of something (especially something representational, like speech) as 'non-representational'. Note that this argument has nothing to do with historical developments concerning language; its focus is the less than ideally stable or determining the structure of a crucial opposition. On Saussure's own account, the relationship between any signifier and signified (we need not go into the exceptions here) is 'unmotivated' or 'arbitrary'. The structure of the sign is such that there is no 'natural attachment' between signier and signified. As Derrida remarks, however, this 'puts in question the idea of naturalness rather than that of attachment' (OG, 46). For surely a sign that consisted of a natural attachment between a signifier and a signied would not be a sign at all; in its naturalness it would be a 'representation' that was non-representational, a contradiction in terms. Such a 'sign' could be only a 'transcendental signified', the very thing in itself that could exist only outside of all signs, all representation, all writing. Yet such existence could be posited or felt only from within what Derrida refers to as 'the general possibility of writing' on which the possibility of equating natural language with speech depends (OG, 52). Writing, then, as a name for what might be called representation in general, conditions the structure of the opposition between speech and writing. This is to say that writing structures that opposition. But it also unstructures it at the same time, because writing comes before speech and hence before the structure of its opposition to speech as a supplementary or representational form of the original. What is a structure that performs a double movement of structuring and unstructuring at once? Perhaps it could be called a structure without structure, or at least without the traditional effects of structure in the form of an indivisible bonding or binding between one thing and another. Without quite acknowledging it, Saussure himself saw (or could have seen) that structure does in fact perform a 'double' operation, for what else is the unmotivated attachment of signifier and signified but a perfect example of the double movement of structure at work? Precisely because of the doubling effects of the structure of the sign, Saussure could argue that signieds are held within signification, fully inscribed within a signifying system that produces (or represents) them as

coming rst, as though they existed prior to and outside of signification or 'the general possibility of writing'. Or indeed outside of signification as the general possibility of writing, or vice versa. For Saussure, then, and for structuralism generally, all differences are grounded on a determining structure of difference. While this dislocates or decentres the idea that differences are natural, transcendental or innate, it does not otherwise disturb metaphysics. This is the lesson of 'Structure, Sign, and Play', which Derrida delivered in 1967 to a conference at Johns Hopkins University which was intended to mark the arrival of structural- ism in the United States. The focus here is on Lévi-Strauss's distinction between bricolage and engineering discourse, where the former describes an asystematic or creative approach to meaning, such that the meaning of a cultural practice or a literary text is produced unpremeditatedly, by making use of whatever happens to be at hand in order to see what 'works'. By contrast, engineering (or scientific) discourse proceeds according to unvarying rules and inexible methods of analysis that enable the engineer or the scientist to solve a problem not by trial and error, but through the rigorous application of rational thought. In this way the engineer or the scientist appears to be the author of his own discourse, sole progenitor of an idea, a theory or a solution. As Derrida argues, though, this distinction between creative and rational thinking depends on a structure of determination that separates them by putting rationality rst and relegating creativity to the order of a special or supplementary case. Yet if bricolage, as a form of creative thought in general, is characterized by the necessity of borrowing ideas and concepts from a general history of ideas, then surely bricolage is typical of every discourse. In that case the absolutely uncreative rationality of the engineer is a 'myth' created by bricolage (WD, 285). Once again the structure of difference – here between bricolage and engineering discourse (or creative and rational thought) – turns out to move in two directions at the same time. Lévi-Strauss himself glimpsed this double movement in what he called the 'scandal' of the incest prohibition, but only to turn away from it. The 'scandal' comes from recognizing that every culture prohibits incest (hence the prohibition is universal, belonging on the side of nature), yet the prohibition itself (as a prohibition or a rule) is cultural. In this way the incest prohibition scandalizes the difference between nature and culture, a difference that has always been taken for granted in 'the domain of traditional concepts' (WD, 283). It is that whole domain of thought, then, the domain of metaphysics, and not simply the structure of the nature–culture opposition, which is scandalized by the incest prohibition: the structure of the incest prohibition cannot be thought within the structure of metaphysics. The very scandalous structure of that prohibition both exceeds and precedes the formation of traditional concepts – as 'the condition of their possibility' (WD, 283) and therefore as the condition of possibility for the metaphysical structure of structure. So it turns out that the 'scandalous' difference of the nature–culture opposition comes before the conceptualization of any structural or meta- physical difference between nature and culture. This is to say that the scandal runs very deep. 'It could perhaps be said that the whole of philo- sophical conceptualization, which is systematic with the nature/culture opposition, is designed to leave in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing that makes this conceptualization possible: the origin of the prohibi- tion of incest' (WD, 283–4). In its double movement, the incest prohibition (natural because universal, cultural because prohibitive) scandalizes metaphysics. In its undecidability, the structure of the prohibition cannot be understood in terms of a centre or an origin. Derrida's point is that this undecidability – the undecidable structure of the incest

prohibition, or the structure of undecidability – is what conditions the possibility of concepts such as 'centre' and 'origin'. Centres and origins are never just there from the beginning, in other words; rather than preceding the work of undecidability, they proceed from it. This is to repeat the argument that writing must come before the structure of its opposition to speech. Similarly, culture must come before the structure of its opposition to nature. Such an argument is a 'scandal' only from within the eld of metaphysics, where structure's double movement is concealed by the idea that structure is foundational and therefore undeconstructible. But what in fact opens the structure or the structurality of structure to the possibility of being deconstructed is an opening or movement within structure itself. In its double movement, structure shows that it contains a certain degree of 'give' or 'play', just as there is always movement in the most tightly bolted engine or the tautest length of rope. This 'movement of play', as Derrida terms it, is 'the movement of supplementarity' (WD, 289), which is the condition of possibility that structures every opposition. The structurality of structure is therefore supplementary. This is not to say that we should henceforth reject or that we could ever abandon structure as a word or a concept. 'There is no sense', Derrida reminds us, 'in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history' (WD, 280). Deconstruction is not anti-metaphysical, then, and neither is poststructuralism anti-structuralist. The purpose of Derrida's post- structuralist rethinking of the metaphysical concept of structure is to show that that concept, like any concept, depends on the necessity of presence being seen as undeconstructible. Metaphysics depends on this necessity, a necessity which occludes its own dependence on the movement of supplementarity (the play of and within structure), which explains why deconstruction commits itself to showing that presence is always decon- structible and must – for critical, political and many other reasons – always be deconstructed.