An Absentological Analysis of the Trace: Pre-Cambrian Arche-Writing, and Jacques Derrida's Realism

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Abstract

The first trace-fossil in the history of terrestrial life dates to the pre-Cambrian era. Left by an unknown species around 542 million years ago, *Treptichnus* are fossilized mud burrows, remaining as a geological testament to the early stages of complex life on Earth. Because of the impossibility of any empirical knowledge relating to these unfossilizable creatures, which presumably lacked a skeletal structure, any philosophical treatment of this paleobiological matter of fact must necessarily engage in speculation. Absentology as a speculative epistemontological register allows us to conceptualize these strange burrows as a key event. Following Jacques Derrida's concept of "arche-writing", our essay presents an absentological reading of the forever unknowable unfossilized animal species. Arche-writing for Derrida is an abstract mode of writing that precedes speech and actual written language, hence this constitutes a concept that can be used for prelinguistic modes of expression. The trace fossils left by these unknown creatures constitute a type of prewriting, as well as the dawn of work, representing a crucial step in the evolution of complex life on this planet. A fossil that is not the animal itself, but rather a trace referring to an unknown organic singularity, this is the absent scene of arche-writing. A more realist Derrida emerges from this encounter, for whom extra-textual elements are even more relevant than explicit language.

Keywords

absentology, Jacques Derrida, philosophy of language, posthumanism

Introduction

The writings of post-modernist philosopher Jacques Derrida continue to be debated by scholars (Farahani, 2014; Guía & Jamal, 2023; Johnsen, 2015; Kennedy, 2023; Lee et al., 2023). One of his most famous expressions was the following: "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, 1967/1997). This became a veritable catch-phrase of the whole postmodern movement. Widely quoted (and mis-quoted), the expression has spread far and wide. Graham Harman, founder of Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO) takes Derrida and Derrideans to task, for advocating an "anti-realism" that makes it impossible for us to even speak of anything outside language (Harman, 2017). But what if we have been misunderstanding Derrida's intentions all along? In this essay, we propose to put aside conventional readings of this notorious sentence, and explicate a weird realism from Derrida's work. Specifically, the concept of "arche-writing" presents itself as a compelling example of the latent realism present in Derrida, the indubitable anti-realist connotations notwithstanding. By deepening our understanding of what the French thinker was trying to say by introducing the idea of arche-writing, we can meliorate the standard interpretation of Derrida as being a hopelessly language-centric thinker. We believe that we have found an example from paleobiology. Through a refractive reading, deconstructionism can be made realist again.

Methods

During the course of this research, we employed qualitative methods, based upon close readings of philosophical works, as well as a selection of paleobiology studies. A qualitative framework was used to reinterpret ontological conclusions stemming from results in the field of paleobiology, through the lens of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy. Specifically, what we were interested in is whether Derrida's work can be read in a realist key.It is commonly supposed that Derrida is an anti-realist who denies the reality of anything apart from human language. Through an analysis of nonhuman prelinguistic forms of signification, however, we show that such a reading fails to do justice to Derrida's work. By incorporating nonhuman forms of „writing", we show that Derrida does have important things to say about reality in itself, outside of human language. The case of Treptichnus (fossilized mud burrows created by an unknown creature, presumably a worm) shows that arche-writing is already present long before the advent of either human beings or complex organisms. Such a discovery deconstructs the supposed primacy and unavoidability of human language vis-a-vis writing. The method of absentology – the study of present absences – is also of crucial importance, as we will never know exactly which species left the Treptichnus trace fossils behind. We are confronted with an unknowledge that nevertheless informs knowledge production in the present.

Results of the Research

We found that a novel, realist interpretation of Jacques Derrida's work is possible. Our reading focused primarily upon Derrida's concept of arche-writing, as elaborated within Of Grammatology. By reading the work together with results in the area of paleobiological

traces left by unknown prehistorical animal species, we can shed new, transdisciplinary light upon deconstructionism and its relationship with nonhuman regions of being. Far from being an anti-realist, Derrida can be interpreted as a realist, who has something important to say about prehuman modes of being too. Human language is not everything: a type of proto-writing, etched into the landscape by the slithering bodies of worms, is present before anything like human presence came on the scene. We are optimistic that by combining a novel reading of Derrida with a realist ontology, further avenues of research into the complex relationship between deconstruction as method and materiality as reality can be unearthed. Our research is of special relevance to researchers working at the intersection of New Materialism, New Realism and Speculative Realism/Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO). In our view, we have contributed to a more complex and less language-centric reinterpretation of Derridean deconstructionism.

Discussion

The Reality of Arche-writing

Before proceeding, it is worth fleshing out the broader textual context of Derrida's notorious pronouncement. The phrase occurs within *Of Grammatology*, a book dedicated to the methodical demolition of Plato's idea that writing is somehow inferior to speech. The very gist of Derrida's entire deconstructive project here is predicated upon a denial of language-centrism. There is always more in play in reality than what any discourse can integrate. Differently put, Derrida is actually a realist when it comes to the infinite complexity of the world. Far from claiming that reality is a construct of language, we read the very opposite in the first introduction of arche-writing: "Difference cannot be thought without the trace. This arche-writing, although its concept is invoked by the themes of "the arbitrariness of the sign" and of difference, cannot and can never be recognized as the object of a science. It is that very thing which cannot let itself be reduced to the form of presence. The latter orders all objectivity of the object and all relation of knowledge" (Derrida, 1967/1997). In essence, what Derrida is saying is that *difference precedes language*. Difference is always already there, at work, upon multiple levels of reality. Language, through its conventions, certainly tries to order reality, but the underlying chaos, inscrutability and uncontrollability of the real remains nonetheless stubbornly present, resistant to our categories.

However powerful they may appear, discourses are never free to construct conventions as they please. Beneath writing, there is a pre-writing in play. Forms of expression, Derrida explains, are "dependent and very derivative" with regard to arche-writing, the latter constituting a surplus of material self-expressivity inaccessible to linguistics: "this arche-writing would be at work not only in the form and substance of graphic expression but *also in those of nongraphic expression*. It would constitute not only the pattern uniting form to all substance, graphic or otherwise, but the movement of the sign-function linking a content to an expression, whether it be graphic or not" (Derrida, 1967/1997, p. 60). There is no question here of reducing everything to language. Quite the opposite: language for Derrida is characterized by a fundamental lack, an inherent inability to account of all forms of becoming. Simply put, there are significant, albeit nongraphic forms of self-expression which matter, without becoming anything like a human language.

"Arche-writing", Derrida continues, "movement of differance, irreducible archesynthesis, opening in one and the same possibility, temporalization as well as relationship with the other and language, cannot, as the condition of all linguistic systems, form a part of the linguistic system itself and be situated as an object in its field" (Derrida, 1967/1997). This form of self-expression would be a pre-writing that forms the precondition of any and all human language. Though separated from language proper by gulfs of time, arche-writing is nonetheless operant, in the form of a primordial inaccessibility. Despite this separation, arche-writing is the evolutionary bedrock of language proper. Indeed, it is not a question of hierarchy: pre-writing/arche-writing is in no way inferior to writing as such. Rather, it forms the primordial precondition of explicit language.

According to Derrida (1967/1997), we may speak of a "presence-absence of the trace", the latter being "the opening of the first exteriority in general", the birthplace of what later became linguistic expression, in the context of "difference as temporalization" (p. 70). As a practitioner of deconstructionism, Derrida was particularly fond of borrowing, reshaping and distorting texts. While breaking away from the letter of Derrideanism, we propose an absentological reading of arche-writing as a concept, one that highlights its status as present-absence. Absentology denotes an epistemology of nonknowledge, a foregrounding of the unknowable.[1] What if we used the Derridean concept of arche-writing in a manifestly *realist* manner? Let us quote Derrida more fully this time, to elucidate its meaning and conceptual import: arche-writing is "the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing. The outside, 'spatial' and 'objective' exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, would not appear without the gramme, without differance as temporalization, without the nonpresense of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death as the concrete structure of the living present" (Derrida, 1967/1997). Exteriority is only intelligible in comparison with an interiority. A body must emerge which maintains an active relationship to its environment.

Derridean Paleobiology

The above extract takes us back, perhaps far further than even Derrida himself could ever have anticipated: we are squarely on the terrain of paleobiology. On such a speculative realist reading, the "first" exteriority would correlate with the emergence of the first complex lifeforms on Earth. Does this hybridization of postmodernist philosophy not risk sliding into a misuse or abuse of science? This depends above all upon the view we take regarding the relationship between philosophy and science. In this field, scientific discourse is quite diverse (Bolinska & Martin, 2021; Hendry & Kidd, 2016; Rosen, 2015; Webmoor, 2015). Alfred North Whitehead, for one, vehemently denied that philosophy should subordinate itself to the natural sciences. Quite the reverse: to make scientific

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1   First proposed in a 2014 article by Jennifer Croissant, absentology is broadly speaking the "sociology of things which aren't there," be they absent objects, missing knowledges, destroyed cultures and haunted landscapes. The Absentology Work Group has taken this neologism and uses it for the analysis of a wide range of phenomena. See Croissant (2014), Horvath & Lovasz (2016), Lovasz (2016), Horvath & Lovasz (2019).

discoveries intelligible, a philosophical explication is required. Whitehead goes so far as to claim that philosophy is the only way we can understand "the nature of things" (Whitehead, 1938). Of course, adherents of scientism could easily brush aside Whitehead's fundamental insight, dismissing the British philosopher as an eccentric or dissident. Unfortunately, this emphasis upon the vital importance of philosophy in knowledge remains the exception rather than the rule, and understandably finds little support among the natural sciences. Still, as a thought experiment, we can use philosophy to illuminate certain matters-of-fact which have proven resistant to scientific knowledge.[2] One such example is *Treptichnus*.[3]

This trace fossil caught our attention completely by accident. It is rare that a single type of fossil denotes a geological boundary. Yet in the case of the Treptichnus trace fossils, this is precisely the case. The dividing line between the Ediacaran and Cambrian periods, around about 541 million years ago, is characterized by the emergence of curious burrows, dug in presumably wet, muddy ground. In this case, the "species" name refers to the burrows themselves, for the animals that made these excavations are long gone, and never fossilized. First named by paleobiologist Jerzy Dzik in 2005, *Treptichnus* represents the earliest known transformation of geological strate by multicellular life-forms. Dzik (2005) went so far as to claim that these humble creatures, most probably worms, contributed to what has become known as the Cambrian Explosion. Since then, the burrows have been discovered across many continents. Because worms lack a skeletal structure, they may only be known through the traces they leave. The trace fossil is a prime example of a "present absence", a matter-of-fact which cannot ever become wholly an object of knowledge. In this sense, *Treptichnus* underlines not only the inaccessibility of real objects rightly emphasized by Harman, but also the primordial inaccessibility of arche-writing highlighted in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. As Derrida notes, "writing appears well before writing in the narrow sense" (Derrida, 1967/1997, p. 128). The worms, through their squirming movements, using the power of their bodies, "wrote" their traces into the geological record. Their presence is what separates two geological eras, a truly remarkable feat for any creature.

The most a relatively recent article claims is that "the burrow-producing animal lived under the thin layer of sand and occasionally protruded out of the sediment," a description that, refreshingly, leaves much to the reader's imagination (Sharma et. al., 2018). Barring the invention of time-travel, we shall never know exactly what kind of organism created these magnificent and perplexing burrows. In this case, it is the very lack of accessibility that underlines the real status of *Treptichnus*. Nothing can access the intimate reality of these ancient worms any longer: the burrows ceased around 99 million years ago, disappearing without explanation. Never can anybody know exactly what manner of life lived, played and squirmed its way through the mud of the pre-Cambrian. The first geologically embedded self-expression of life on Earth, written forever into fossilized mud

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2   A widely cited example is the mystery surrounding the status of consciousness. Most recently, philosopher David Chalmers won a bet with cognitive scientist Christoph Koch, regarding the possibility of a reductionist account of consciousness. Chalmers denied that such an account is possible, whereas Koch was optimistic regarding this development. To date, reductionist materialism has proven incapable of explaining consciousness. See Horgan (2023).

3   In using an animal example, we follow the footsteps of posthumanist scholar Rodolfo Piskorski, who has argued for an Animal Studies-based "zoogrammatological" reading of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, emphasizing the multiple ways animals "write" themselves. See Piskorski (2020).

deposits, these burrows form the arche-writing that made possible not only the Cambrian Explosion, but all subsequent language. If there is an origin of language, then *Treptichnus* surely qualifies as a fantastic example, in the double sense of awakening our awe, while also mobilizing our intellectual-speculative faculties. An absentological matter-of-fact would be a circumstance unamenable to any mode of explication. The best we can do is illuminate and speculate upon present absence, a fact here yet not here, tantalizingly exposed yet evasively distant.

Conclusion

In this short essay, we have elucidated Derrida's concept of arche-writing. Against anti-realist readings of Derrida, we introduced an innovative, realist interpretation of Derrida's work. Applying the arche-writing idea to *Treptichnus*, mysterious burrows left in the geological record by pre-Cambrian worms, we have shown that arche-writing can refer to a non-mythic, empirically proven, albeit absentological fact, a presence unavailable to direct access. These trace fossils constitute the clearest example of arche-writing, the latter denoting that specific mode of primordial self-expression which makes language possible. The *Treptichnus* trace fossils are replete with meanings, and of these only some can be decoded by science. Where empirical proofs end, speculative philosophy begins. Speculation is the sole mode of coming to terms with the sheer excessiveness of reality.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Adam Lovasz is a researcher and philosopher based in Budapest. Adam's interests include Object-Oriented-Ontology, New Materialism, post-anthropocentrism and process philosophy. Adam is presently writing a book entitled *On Nature* and also co-writing a book with Mark Horvath about the topic of absentology. Adam is author of *Updating Bergson* (2021) and *The System of Absentology in Ontological Philosophy* (2016) and has also published in numerous peer-reviewed journals.

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8