

The Materiality of Text:

On the Distinction Between Textual Ontology and Derridean Textuality

Nico A. Heller, Berlin, March 2026

I. The Surface Resemblance

Any framework that takes "text" as a central category will invite comparison with Jacques Derrida. His dictum *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* --- there is no outside-text --- has been the dominant philosophical reference point for claims about the primacy of the textual for more than half a century. The surface resemblance between Derrida's position and that of *A Textual Ontology* is strong enough that the distinction must be stated with precision, because the two frameworks are not variants of the same idea. They operate at different philosophical levels, make different kinds of claims, and produce different consequences for thought and practice.

The distinction turns on a single word: materiality.

II. Derrida's Text: The Dissolution of Materiality

Derrida's project is epistemological and deconstructive. His claim is that we cannot access reality except through the play of signs --- that meaning is constituted through *différance*, the endless deferral of presence, in which no signifier reaches a final signified. "There is no outside-text" does not mean, as his critics sometimes caricature it, that nothing exists but words. It means that we have no access to a reality that stands free of textual mediation. Everything we encounter, we encounter within the play of signs.

The consequence is that text, in Derrida's sense, is dematerialised. It is not a substance, not a physical reality, not something with material weight or material consequence. It is the *condition* of meaning --- the structure of deferral through which any meaning becomes possible. Signs point to other signs. Traces refer to other traces. Presence is always deferred. The text is never *here* in the way a thing is here; it is always elsewhere, always in the movement of *différance*.

This is philosophically powerful as critique. Derrida dismantles every claim to unmediated access to reality --- every metaphysics of presence, every foundationalism, every appeal to a ground outside the text. The deconstruction is thorough and, within its own terms, irrefutable. But it comes at a cost: text, in Derrida's hands, cannot act. It can signify, defer, undermine, destabilise --- but it

cannot build, intervene, or transform material conditions. A hegemonic narrative, in Derrida's framework, is an arrangement of signs that always already contains the seeds of its own deconstruction. This is analytically satisfying. It is practically inert. Hegemonic narratives do not, in historical fact, politely deconstruct themselves.

Derrida abstained from ontology deliberately. He regarded ontological claims as reinscriptions of the metaphysics of presence he was deconstructing. This means his framework has no account of what reality *is* --- only of how we are always already entangled in the textual conditions of knowing. The question of text's relationship to the physical world is not one he refuses to answer. It is one he refuses to ask.

III. Text in A Textual Ontology: The Triple Materiality

A Textual Ontology takes text as an ontological primitive. TEXT does not mediate our access to reality; it co-inhabits reality in singular existence with quantum fields. The claim is not epistemological but ontological: not "we cannot escape text" but "text and matter are one world."

This makes text material in three simultaneous and inseparable senses.

Material as building stuff. Materials are what you construct from --- a builder's materials, a researcher's materials, the materials of an argument. In the framework, text is literally the stuff from which narratives, institutions, scientific theories, political orders, and cultural formations are built. Not figuratively, not as metaphor for how language shapes thought, but as an ontological claim: text is the material from which the second creation constructs its formations, as stone and timber are the material from which buildings are constructed. Fragments are the working units. Fragment ecologies are the relational structures. Narrative prefiguration is the method of working with these materials.

Material as consequential. A material witness. A material difference. Material evidence. In each case, "material" means: it makes a difference to the outcome, it has weight and bearing, it cannot be dismissed. In the framework, narratives are material in this sense because they are not representations of power but *are* power --- materially instantiated in fragment ecologies, shaping what can be thought, said, and done. A hegemonic narrative does not describe domination. It is domination, textually enacted. This is why narratives have the force they manifestly have --- why political narratives reshape societies, why scientific narratives redirect the material world, why historical narratives determine what a civilisation can become. They matter because they are material.

Material as physically real. A ripple in a quantum field is not a substance you can hold, but it is physically real --- it has energy, it interacts with other ripples, it

produces measurable effects. In the framework, text is material in this sense because TEXT and quantum fields collapse into each other at the point of articulation. Text is not layered over materiality as a separate domain of signs. It shares the ontological density of the physical --- because what we approach from the direction of physics as quantum fields, we approach from the direction of meaning as TEXT, and neither description is more fundamental.

The three senses are not coincidentally sharing a word. They are structurally linked. Text has consequence (second sense) *because* it is physically real (third sense) and *because* it is the stuff from which formations are built (first sense). The material consequence of a narrative --- its capacity to shape, dominate, transform --- is not a mysterious addition to physical reality. It is what physical reality looks like when approached from the direction of meaning.

IV. The Consequences for Praxis

The distinction between Derrida's text and the framework's text is not merely theoretical. It determines what philosophy can do.

If text is what Derrida says it is --- signs, deferral, mediation, the play of *différance* --- then praxis is limited to deconstruction: revealing the instabilities within existing structures, showing that every foundation is groundless, every presence is deferred. This is valuable critical work. But it cannot ground constructive transformation, because constructive transformation requires materials --- something to build with, something that has material weight and material consequence. Deconstruction can dismantle a house. It cannot build one, because it has dissolved the concept of building material.

If text is what *A Textual Ontology* says it is --- material in all three senses --- then praxis is not limited to critique. It extends to transformation: the recognition and actualisation of possibilities already latently present within existing configurations. Narrative prefiguration is possible as a methodology precisely because narratives are material --- they can be worked with, reconfigured, assembled, and the reconfiguration has material consequence because the material of reconfiguration is materially real. Fragment work --- the strategic selection, assembly, and reconfiguration of narrative fragments --- is material labour in the same way that a builder's work with stone is material labour. The difference is that the material is semantic rather than physical. But within the framework, this is not a difference in ontological status. It is a difference in the direction of approach.

This is also why the framework can name hegemony in a way Derrida's cannot. Narrative and hegemony are, in the framework's terms, intimately related --- not

because narratives represent hegemonic power, but because hegemonic narratives *are* material power, textually instantiated and textually maintained. Derrida cannot make this claim because his text has no material weight. Marx cannot make it either, because his materiality has no textual dimension --- for Marx, narratives are superstructure, ideology, derivative of the real relations of production that operate beneath them.

The framework can make the claim because it refuses both dissolutions. It does not dissolve materiality into text (Derrida) or text into materiality (Marx). It holds both in singular existence --- one world, two directions of approach, collapsing into each other at the point of articulation.

V. The Cruc

Derrida's text is doubly immaterial: without physical substance and without material consequence. It signifies but does not act. It mediates but does not build. It defers but does not transform.

The framework's text is doubly material: physically real and materially consequential. It acts because it has substance. It transforms because it matters. It matters because, in a world where TEXT and quantum fields are singular, mattering is not a human judgement about significance but a feature of reality articulating itself.

The difference between the two positions is the difference between a philosophy that can critique the world and a philosophy that can change it.

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