

# The Invention of Jacques Derrida, Physics Faker<sup>1</sup>

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So far as I know, the only statements made by Jacques Derrida that have been alleged to constitute physics faking are certain fragments of his 1966 response to a question by Jean Hyppolite. All contain the remark, ‘The Einsteinian constant is not a constant, is not a center.’ I first encountered this cryptic remark, together with the charge that it is physics faking, in *Higher Superstition*, a polemical work by Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt. The colleague who showed it to me later told Levitt that I had complained that he and Gross had failed to show not merely that they did not understand what Derrida was saying—neither did I—but that there *is* nothing to understand because Derrida was only faking familiarity with deep scientific matters. According to my colleague, Levitt ignored my complaint and boasted that he had fifty examples that are as bad or worse.

This was ten years ago and I still have not seen any other statements by Derrida that were alleged to constitute physics faking.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in *Fashionable Nonsense*, Sokal and Bricmont volunteer that they know of none and, furthermore, do not believe that there are any.<sup>3</sup> However, not only do they know of *no other* such statements, they know of *none*. So far as I know, there have been only two attempts to do more than merely roll one’s eyes at the remark and feign sophistication, neither by Sokal or Bricmont. The first, by Ernest Gallo, is discussed below. The other, by Steven Weinberg in the *New York Review of Books* (1996), is discussed in “Reading and relativism” (42-44). In each case, the attempt to engage with Derrida’s text in order to expose him as a physic faker succeeds only in making the author look ridiculous.

**A new irrationalism:** Gallo’s attempt *to demonstrate* that the “Einsteinian constant” remark is gibberish appeared in his article, “Nature faking in the humanities” (*Skeptical Inquirer* Summer 1991). He begins:

There is a new irrationalism abroad in the academy. It flourishes among certain humanists who attempt to find close ties between the humanities and the sciences. They do this not by making their own methods more rigorous, but by supposing the scientific method to be extremely arbitrary.

As a prime example of this allegedly *new* irrationalism, Gallo offers us Derrida’s then quarter of a century old answer to a question asked by his colleague, Jean Hyppolite, at the end of a lecture about structuralism, in an effort to understand Derrida’s talk about ‘a center for a structure.’ Hyppolite asked whether a certain ‘constant’ that he said had been introduced by Einstein and is a ‘combination of space-time’ is an example of such a center. In his reply, Derrida used the term, “the Einsteinian constant,” in talking about the entity that Hyppolite had described in this way. Gallo’s alleged demonstration of the irrationality of this reply begins as follows.

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<sup>2</sup> Or any other brand of science or mathematics faking.

<sup>3</sup> They are trying to justify not having a chapter about Derrida.

In the following dialogue, Jean Hyppolite has just objected that amid the surprising paradoxes of Einstein's universe there is at least one constant: the velocity of light. Derrida has no patience with such heresy.

Is this true? Here is the text of what Hyppolite has just said.

With Einstein, for example, we see the end of a kind of privilege of empiric evidence. And in that connection, we see a constant appear, a constant which is a combination of space-time, which does not belong to any of the experimenters who live the experience, but which, in a way, dominates the whole construct; and this notion of the constant—is this the center?

Where is Hyppolite's objection? Where are the surprising paradoxes? Gallo seems to be hallucinating. Note also that Hyppolite does not say that this constant is the velocity of light. This is merely Gallo's assumption.<sup>4</sup> Also, although one would never guess from reading Gallo, in this quote, Hyppolite is asking Derrida a question. He is asking if a certain constant is a center for a certain structure. The notion of a center for a structure, which dominates the first part of Derrida's lecture on structuralism, does not figure in Gallo's account even though it figures prominently in Derrida's answer to Hyppolite, which Gallo reads as Derrida expressing impatience with the "heresy" that the velocity of light is constant. Is this right? Here is Derrida's answer.

The Einsteinian constant is not a constant, is not a center. It is the very concept of variability—it is, finally, the concept of the game. In other words, it is not the concept of something—of a center starting from which an observer could master the field—but the very concept of the game which, after all, I was trying to elaborate.

So, Derrida says that the constant to which Hyppolite refers, "the Einsteinian constant," is *not* a center. He says also that it is not a constant. What does this mean? Gallo assumes that the second occurrence of "constant" refers to a numerical constant. But Derrida's lecture is concerned with a different kind of constancy, that of a center with respect to a structure. So it makes sense to take Derrida to be saying that the Einsteinian constant is not a center because it is not constant in the way that a center is constant. Also, when Hyppolite goes on to ask if the Einsteinian constant is "a constant in the game," Derrida replies, "It is *the* constant of the game." Gallo ignores the apparent contradiction between this reply and his earlier claim that Derrida denies that the velocity of light is constant. Finally, when Hyppolite remarks that the Einsteinian constant is "the rule of the game," Derrida adds,

It is a rule of the game that does not govern the game: it is a rule of the game that does not dominate the game. Now, when the rule of the game is displaced by the game itself, we must find something other than the word rule.

Gallo then says, "In short, the world of physics is rule-free—that is, totally arbitrary and subject to the whim of the observer." But Derrida does not say anything remotely like this. As for what he does say, one possible reading is that, what we accept as laws of physics are not known to be constitutive of either physics or the world. If they were, no

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<sup>4</sup> For what it is worth, Steven Weinberg disagrees. See "Reading and relativism" (42-44).

measurement or discovery could ever confirm or refute them. Hence, in this sense, nothing that we call a law of physics can be said to *govern* either physical reality or our investigation of it.

In the end, Gallo's attempt to demonstrate Derrida's alleged irrationalism serves only to reveal his own carelessness.

**Gallo begat Gross and Levitt:** Gallo was read by Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, who, in a pretentiously ignorant wisecrack about Derrida's remark that I mentioned in "Reading and relativism" (33-34) said with fake authority that the Einsteinian constant is "of course" the speed of light<sup>5</sup> and avoided the contradiction noted above by failing to mention the assertion of Derrida that gives rise to it. Several years later, in the second edition of *Higher Superstition* (1998), they added the following comment, which nicely demonstrates their contempt for traditional standards of evidence and the intelligence of their readers.

A. Plotnitsky, a deconstructive literary theorist with some mathematics and physics background, has attempted to show that the bizarre "Einsteinian constant" comment of Jacques Derrida, which has by now attracted much scornful attention by physicists, actually makes sense in the context of relativity theory ("But it is above all not true": Derrida, Relativity, and the 'Science Wars,'" *Postmodern Culture*, published electronically.) His effort is admirable for its ingenuity and even more so for its presumptuousness. Its accuracy is another matter, and its honesty is decidedly another matter.<sup>6</sup>

What is the point of making such charges without providing any evidence? I find it disturbing to even speculate about this. But apparently Johns Hopkins University Press had no problem publishing them.

**Gross and Levitt begat Sokal:** In "Reading and relativism," I mentioned Alan Sokal's explanation, in a radio interview, of how *Higher Superstition* and, in particular, its sarcastic treatment of the Derrida quote, was a source of inspiration for his hoax of the journal, *Social Text*. Although the quote loomed large in Sokal's announcement of the hoax, he said nothing about why it deserved to be there, giving this reader, at least, the impression that he considered it so obviously nonsense that nothing more needed to be said. This impression was confirmed several years later, in a commentary on the hoax (*Fashionable Nonsense*, 263) in which Sokal and Jean Bricmont, say that although they have no idea what Derrida's remark means, they nevertheless know that it is gibberish! Here are their exact words.

[T]he primary purpose of this section is to provide a gentle lead-in to the article's first major gibberish quote, namely Derrida's comment on relativity ("the Einsteinian constant is not a constant..."). We haven't the slightest idea what this means—and neither, apparently, does Derrida—but as it is a one-shot abuse, committed orally at a conference, we shall not belabor the point.

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<sup>5</sup> See note 4 above.

<sup>6</sup> The reader is urged to check that this is indeed all that they have to say about this matter.

They then proceed to belabor the point in the following, muddled footnote.

For an amusing attempt, by a postmodernist author who does know some physics, to come up with something Derrida's words could conceivably have meant that might make sense, see Plotnitsky (1997). The trouble is that Plotnitsky comes up with at least two alternative technical interpretations of Derrida's phrase "the Einsteinian constant", without providing any convincing evidence that Derrida intended (or even understood) either of them.

This is bad reasoning. Such evidence is not needed to refute an alleged *justification* of such a charge. Think of the case of mathematics. To refute an alleged proof of a claim, it is sufficient but not necessary to refute the claim itself.<sup>7</sup> Plotnitsky's interpretations serve as reminders that Sokal and Bricmont have no justification of their charge. Also, if, as it seems, they accept on faith that Derrida's words are nonsense, then, for them, the *real* trouble with these two interpretations is not that there are two but that neither of can be what Derrida meant because, according to them, he did not mean anything!

**And Sokal begat Weinberg:** In "Reading and relativism" (42-44), I debunked Steven Weinberg's attempts in "Sokal's hoax" and an exchange with George Levine to prove that the 'Einsteinian constant' remark is physics faking. I have no more to say about this here.

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<sup>7</sup> The claim might be true but this particular attempt to prove it might contain an error.