

# Jacques Derrida Dies

The following is based on the obituary that appeared on [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) by Patricia Sullivan, Washington Post Staff Writer, October 10, 2004.

Jacques Derrida, 74, originator of deconstruction, died Oct. 9 of pancreatic cancer. His death was announced by the office of French President Jacques Chirac.

Mr. Derrida (pronounced "deh-ree-DAH") inspired and infuriated a generation of intellectuals and students. An immensely influential thinker, Mr. Derrida's seminal ideas permeated college campuses during the 1960s, '70s and '80s. "Deconstruction" has become one of the few terms that has escaped from philosophical and literary papers to pepper modern culture, from movie reviews to government policy pronouncements.

"With him, France has given the world one of its greatest contemporary philosophers, one of the major figures of intellectual life of our time," Chirac said in a statement.

Language, Derrida argued, is inadequate to provide a clear and unambiguous view of reality. The fixed meaning of an essay, a book, a personal letter, a scientific treatise or a recipe dissolves when hidden ambiguities and contradictions are revealed. These contradictions, inevitable in every piece of writing, he said, reveal deep fissures in the foundation of the Western world's civilizations, cultures and creations.

The fact that there is no single meaning does not mean there is no meaning, he said, and it doesn't excuse writers, thinkers and speakers from trying to be as clear as possible about what they think they mean.

Deconstruction both electrified and polarized those with the intellectual muscle to unwind its implications. Supporters said this insight into the layered meanings and incompleteness of language strips centuries of assumptions from words and allows fresh ideas to emerge.

Critics called it nihilism (the denial of the meaning of existence, or denial of the existence of any basis for knowledge and truth), a charge he vehemently denied.

His work has attracted greater enthusiasm from literary critics and language professors than from formally trained philosophers or scientists. Some Cambridge University faculty members, objecting to their school's plan to award Mr. Derrida an honorary degree in 1992, derided his work for "denying the distinctions between fact and fiction, observation and imagination, evidence and prejudice."

He also was drawn into debates about a friend, Yale professor Paul DeMan, who wrote anti-Semitic articles in Nazi-occupied Belgium, and about an intellectual forebear, Martin Heidegger, whose amoral attitude led him to embrace Nazism.

In his own life, he was part of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, in favor of freedom of expression in pre-1989 Czechoslovakia and for the rights of Algerian immigrants in France. He told several interviewers that he really wanted to be a soccer player but didn't have the athletic talent.

Mr. Derrida was born in El Biar, Algeria, the middle child in a Jewish family whose father was a salesman. At age 12, he was dismissed from school as the Vichy government's anti-Semitic laws emerged.

He was a good enough student later to be admitted to Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he earned an advanced degree in philosophy in 1956. He taught philosophy at the University of Paris at the Sorbonne and at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

He also taught at Johns Hopkins University, Yale University and the University of California at Irvine.

Survivors include his wife, Marguerite Aucouturier, a psychoanalyst; and two sons, Pierre and Jean.

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