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# RECONSTITUTING *DIFFÉRANCE AS HISTORY* THROUGH DERRIDA'S REDUCTION OF HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

**ABSTRACT**
This article advances three arguments. First, understanding Derrida's *différance* and the qualification 'quasi-transcendental' requires retracing the path leading to Derrida's *historical* methodological schema. Second, it is methodologically and *historically* necessary to begin this path with the reactivation of Husserl's criticism and reduction of all forms of empiricism, including historicism. This reactivation grants phenomenology a structural role in Derrida's philosophy and challenges historicist interpretations of Derrida's work. Third, the irreducibility of writing at the core of phenomenology's ultimate transcendental experience of *phōnē* reduces the tradition of metaphysics, distinguishing its inessential elements – presence in all its forms as absolute beginning and end of sense – from its essential elements – writing as the essential production of signification to infinity unrestricted by truth and objectivity. This irreducibility is quasi-transcendental because it makes the phenomenological edifice possible only as a symbolic representation representing nothing, but impossible as the fulfilment of the subject's intention in an intuition.

**KEYWORDS**
*Différance*, *history*, historical phenomenology, quasi-transcendental, reduction, Husserl.

## Introduction

In "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Derrida," Derrida states, "I consider myself very much a *historian* [...] Deconstruction calls for a [...] '*historian*'s' attitude" (Derrida 1992: 54, italics added) and a "*historical* responsibility" (Derrida 1992: 55, italics added). These claims are rather straightforward in stating how Derrida sees himself and the work of deconstruction: he identifies himself as a *historian*, and deconstruction demands the attitude of the *historian* and the assumption of a *historical* responsibility. Yet this straightforwardness is very quickly problematised in the lines immediately following these claims, for he says, "this *historicity* or this *historical* responsibility is not necessarily linked to awareness, knowledge, or even the themes of history" (ibid, italics added). These latter remarks indicate that what

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Derrida associates with the terms *history*, *historian*, and *historicity* is unrelated to what they mean in historicism, historiography or philosophy of history (see also Derrida 1976: xc). Elsewhere, he even affirms that the *history* he refers to is "unrecognisable" (Derrida 1992a: 27).

Contrary to a certain authoritative interpretation, this is not deliberate obfuscation on Derrida's part (Searle 1983). Rather, Derrida is making a distinction between *history*, which he and the work of deconstruction are concerned with and which I italicise throughout, and history related to a certain common knowledge, awareness, and themes associated with this term. This distinction is, I argue, a deliberate *historical*-methodological step, which is intended to bracket any passively received concept of history in order to question its *origin* and track an *other history*, which Derrida terms *différance*, and characterises as quasi-transcendental. Yet this latter term, defined as a "condition of possibility [...] [and] impossibility" (Derrida 1996: 84), remains unclear in both its provenance and implications. In cultural studies, it is often used without regard for Derrida's distinction between *history* and history, and its methodological purpose, hastily assimilating it into forms of radical historicisms (of various denominations) committed to naïve empirical presuppositions. For example, Guenther (2021) affirms that the distinctiveness of quasi-transcendental as opposed to empirical inquiries rests on the use of the phenomenological method "to bracket the natural attitude and uncover apodictic structures" (Guenther 2021: 12), and "to bracket [...] sexism, racism, colonialism and classism" (ibid) with the aim of "follow[ing] the traces of these contingent, historical structures *in the world*, in the habits of embodied consciousness [...]" (ibid, italics added). Her description mixes objectives and methods of phenomenology and radical historicism without clarifying how they can be reconciled[1]. Another example is Kramer (2014), who uses the phrase 'quasi-transcendental structures' in order to analyse 'constitutive exclusion'. In her conclusions, she states that her analyses are "historical" (Kramer 2014: 549) but fails to raise the question of how to understand the concept of history after 'the analysis of the quasi-transcendental' challenges the empirical-transcendental distinction, making both sides of the opposition equally suspicious. Among philosophers, by contrast, the quasi-transcendental quickly adopts ahistorical and metaphysical undertones. For instance, Habermas affirms that Derrida does not break with the reflective theory of the subject, but only makes the subject "dependent on the still profounder [...] basis of an originative power" (Habermas 1987: 178-179). Although Dews uses metaphors of height rather than depth, he holds an analogous view to Habermas, for Dews sees Derrida "mov[ing] 'upstream,' in a quest for the ground of transcendental consciousness itself" (Dews 1987: 19).

1 Guenther explicitly says that her use of the term quasi-transcendental "is closer to Sartre's (2004) practico-inert [...] than it is to Derrida's account of the quasi-transcendental" (Guenther 2021: 6n3). However, she does not explain why she prefers to use a Derridean term to mean something that the Sartrean term would more accurately describe.

This article aims to clarify Derrida's use of the terms *history* and quasi-transcendental by tracing the trajectory that led Derrida to develop his unique understanding of, and methodological approach to, *history*. This clarification yields an interpretation of Derrida's work as a non-empirical, non-idealist, and non-transcendental *historicism* where *différance* is understood as the distinctive *history* of signification requiring a two-register *historical* "methodological schema."[2] I argue that Derrida developed his *historicism* as parallel to, and reduction of, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Although there are interpretations of Derrida's work attentive to the extent to which Husserl's phenomenology informs it, the interpretation I outline here differs in that it does not take one or another term or methodological tool of phenomenology as explanatory of Derrida's work. Rather, it argues that Derrida's philosophy is structurally intertwined with Husserl's phenomenology, for although Derrida effectively reduces phenomenology, the latter is not negated. As with any reduction, phenomenology is at once retained, "'like the bracketed in the bracket'" (Husserl cited in Derrida 1973: 73), and transformed. This means, as I explain below, that phenomenology (and metaphysics more generally) has a structural role in Derrida's philosophy just as, vice versa, Derrida's philosophy has a 'constituting' role in phenomenology.

The article is structured as follows. Section II justifies the interpretive approach I adopt in contrast to alternative Husserlian interpretations of Derrida's philosophy. Section III reconstructs the *historical* and methodological arguments underlying Derrida's repetition of phenomenology, argues against the assimilation of Derrida's philosophy to forms of radical historicism, and rejects empirical interpretations of *différance* and the term quasi-transcendental. Section IV retraces the argumentative path leading to the reduction of phenomenology and the disclosure of *différance* as *history*, and clarifies the sense of quasi-transcendental through a discussion of Dews's criticisms of Derrida's work as an unconfessed transcendental philosophy.

## Reconstituting a Chain in Motion

Derrida claims to have "fashion[ed] [...] a novel 'strategic device' for 'reading, writing, and interpretation' between '1963 and 1968' ('TT' 40)" (Kates 2005: 105). These years correspond to the period between the publication of the *Introduction* (1989) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), making it clear that it is during his study of Husserl's phenomenology that Derrida worked out his strategic device or 'methodological schema.' Marrati (2005) infers that "if it is through an interpretation of Husserl that Derrida formulates his own questions, [...] he does so because there is *something* in Husserl's phenomenology that lends itself or gives rise to just such an elaboration" (Marrati 2005: xiv,

2 I use the phrase "methodological schema" throughout the text following Derrida's own usage when, regarding his philosophy, he states, "there is no method but there are some methodological schema" (Derrida 2001d: 110).

italics added). The use of the indeterminate word 'something' in her claim reveals the lack of agreement regarding what Derrida takes from Husserl. For the most part, interpreters of Derrida's philosophy through his engagement with Husserl assume that this 'something' is one of phenomenology's methodological tools or Husserl's reflections on time. How exactly Derrida incorporates these borrowings into his own project differentiates these interpretations. Marrati and Hägglund (2008) agree that Husserl's reflections on internal time-consciousness are at the core of Derrida's temporalisation, and Marrati also regards transcendental questions as another Husserlian resource in Derrida's philosophy. Lawlor (2002) convincingly argues that Derrida's deconstruction, like Husserl's phenomenology, is guided by the question of genesis, although Derrida, he says, largely sets this concern aside during the 1990s when his work becomes explicitly political. Kaarto's main thesis in his impressive *Jacques Derrida and the Question of Interpretation* (2008) is that Derrida's methodological schema resembles Husserl's reduction. Dews (1987, 1988) states that Derrida maintains Husserl's criticism of empiricism, transcendental phenomenology's vocabulary of 'necessities' and 'structures', and even, he argues, the intentions of his transcendental philosophy. Finally, Kates (2005) advances his developmental thesis and emphasises Derrida's appropriation of Husserl's "philosophical responsibility."

The resources these interpreters claim that Derrida borrows from Husserl are numerous and important: Husserl's reflections on internal time-consciousness, transcendental questions, the question of genesis, the reduction, the criticisms and reduction of empiricism, some of phenomenology's vocabulary, the task of philosophical responsibility, and possibly also transcendental aims. If taken together, as I believe they should, they lend plausibility to the interpretation that Derrida might be doing more than simply borrowing one or two elements from Husserl's phenomenology. For one, the cherry-picking approach to criticism is something Derrida himself questions. In "The Double Session," Derrida states, "a reading here should no longer be carried out as a simple table of concepts or words, as a static or statistical sort of punctuation" (Derrida 2004: 208). Rather, it should engage with the very movement of a thought. He affirms, "one must reconstitute a chain in motion, the effects of a network and the play of a syntax" (ibid). Indeed, Derrida does not simply take one or another methodological tool or reflection from Husserl's phenomenology but rather engages with it as a whole, and patiently "follow[s phenomenology's trajectory] to the end" (Derrida 1976: 50).

Although Derrida points to an operation absolutely external to philosophy, he insists on the necessity of proceeding from within the discourse of philosophy (cf. Derrida 2001c: 354), lending it a structural role within Derrida's work. Thus, in developing his methodological schema, Derrida does not 'follow phenomenology' as a distant and critical observer. Instead, he effectively repeats Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and transcendental history from the inside, as it were, and later reduces and transforms them in order to unveil another kind of *history* and another mode of studying *history*. Significantly, it is

*only* in this way that Derrida claims to be able to undertake an effective critique. He states, "The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures" (Derrida 1976: 24).

Unsurprisingly, this is a lesson Derrida learns from Husserl himself. In the *Origin of Geometry*, Husserl poses the question of the originary production of geometrical sense. Yet Husserl cannot go back directly to this originary creative intention, for there are layers of sedimentation covering it over, as I explain more extensively in subsequent sections. Instead, he starts from geometry as he encounters it and reduces its empiricity to reveal its essence, which functions as a guide for reconstructing the intentional acts that produced the geometry that he encounters. Only thus can he re-produce the originary production of geometrical sense (cf. Derrida 1989: 38). In other words, Husserl undertakes the reconstruction of the internal and intentional history of geometry with the help of its end-product, which, though reduced, is retained. This mode of proceeding is, I argue, analogous to Derrida's own in developing his methodological schema.

In what follows, I trace the development of Derrida's methodological schema in order to clarify the notions of *history* – *différance* – and quasi-transcendentality.

## The Reduction of Empiricism and Transcendental History

In "Derrida's 'Antigonanette': On the Quasi-transcendental," Kramer analyses the way Derrida "interrogates the relationship between the transcendental and the empirical" (Kramer 2014: 535) in *Glas*. She carefully presents Derrida's problematisation of Hegel's eidetic sister, Antigone, by attending to his empirical sisters, Nanette and his wife. The *eidos* of the brother-sister relation consists in the recognition of difference without opposition, on account of their being related by blood, and in their seeing themselves as equals and without desire. Such an *eidos* appears arbitrary and limiting. Kramer asks, "Why are some differences taken as necessary rather than contingent?" (Kramer, 2014: 537). Her conclusion, however, is empirical, and therefore leads to relativism and scepticism, both of which Derrida rejects. Kramer states, "the transcendental would have to be viewed as *provisional* [...] [and as] a matter of interpretation [...] [S]uch an interpretation of what is transcendental and what is empirical would need to be undertaken again and again" (Kramer 2014: 538).

Although Kramer does not describe her analysis as radical historicist, her mode of proceeding, which is common among politically inclined applications of Derrida's work, bears a similarity to radical historicism. Radical historicism aims to unveil the hidden power relations and the corresponding material contradictions conditioning social phenomena; in Kramer's case, the phenomenon in focus is constitutive exclusion. In particular, the radical historicist's "analysis focuses exclusively on unearthing its [object of analysis] hidden patriarchal, Eurocentrist, identitarian or other 'bias'" (Žižek 2000: 101), for the historicist sees all objects not merely as social constructs but as inherently oppressive

ones that need to be revealed as such and dismantled. Like classical historicism, radical historicism results in historical relativism that rejects absolutes on the basis that all objects are relative to historical conditions. If, as Žižek affirms, "'to deconstruct' a certain notion equals demonstrating how its universality is secretly marked [by] [...] actual social and ideological antagonisms" (ibid), then Derrida's deconstructive methodological schema is indeed a form of radical historicism. This is, however, a grave misrepresentation of deconstruction which spills into its key notions, *différance* and quasi-transcendental. Žižek says that it "is [...] crucial to distinguish the strict deconstructionist stance from [...] historicism" (ibid) in order to prevent the hasty identification of the two.

Žižek is not alone in holding this view. Dews (1987, 1988), one of Derrida's most careful interpreters and critics, writes that Derrida's thought "is heavily reliant upon a reactivation of the *anti-relativist* impulse of Husserl's phenomenology" (Dews 1987: 5). Moreover, this anti-relativist impulse "is by no means merely a feature of Derrida's early work, a temporary residue of his phenomenological formation" (Dews 1987: 7). On the contrary, Derrida's critique of the naivety of empiricism runs throughout his work as does his differentiation between empiricism and his own approach (cf. Derrida 1981: 64-65; Derrida 1988b: 127; Derrida 1989: 50, 10, 162; Derrida 1992: 54-57; Derrida 1996, 84; Derrida 2001a, 173-174, 189-190, 199, among others[3]). Yet Derrida's explicit self-characterisation as a "*historian*" (Derrida 1988b: 127; also Derrida 1992: 54, italics added) is difficult to square with his criticism of historicism: how can he question historicism *while* regarding himself a *historian*?

There is no contradiction here, but dispelling the appearance of contradiction requires clarifying what Derrida means by *history* and how it differs from the view of empirical historicism, including radical historicism. For this purpose, the term 'reactivation' in Dews' citation above is highly appropriate – although he did not intend it as such. Derrida effectively reactivates Husserl's criticism of empiricism, including historicism, making it both a step in his methodological schema and a *historical* moment in *différance*. This section has two aims: first, to challenge the identification of deconstruction with radical historicism and historical relativism; second, to begin clarifying (a) Derrida's necessary traversing of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which leads to his quasi-transcendental philosophy, (b) deconstruction as a unique form of *historicism*, and (c) Derrida's methodological schema as a *historical* one. Section IV builds on and refines this initial clarification.

Reactivation aptly describes Derrida's relation to Husserl's criticism of empiricism in particular and his phenomenology generally because, as a technical term in phenomenology, it refers both to a methodological approach to studying history *and* a participation in history, which, significantly, are intrinsically intertwined. As Ricoeur states in relation to Husserl, "Not content to think

3 See Kates (2005: 30) for a sample of Derrida's explicit endorsements of Husserl's criticisms of empiricism, historicism, psychologism, and the relativism and scepticism that ensue from them.

about history, to think himself into history, the phenomenologist assumes the surprising task of founding a new age" (Ricoeur 1967: 143). Indeed, reactivation is a methodological approach to 'think' history *and* a founding historical act. Husserl brings reactivation to its climax in his historical investigations, from which Derrida learns and later transforms during his fifteen-year proto-deconstruction engagement with phenomenology. For Husserl, 'reactivation' has three principal significations: ethical, methodological and practical-historical.

Reactivation is first of all the ethical task of Husserl's historical phenomenology. Faced with the crisis of the sciences, philosophy, and Europe, understood as a "pathology" that "has the profound *ethical* sense of a fall into 'passivity,' of an inability to be rendered 'responsible' for the sense [of the world and our existence] in an authentic activity" (Derrida 1989: 80n81, italics added), Husserl undertakes a *Reaktivierung* in order to reawaken the primordial act of sense-formation. "*Reaktivierung* is [...] the very act of all *Verantwortung* [responsibility] and of all *Besinnung* [sense-investigation]" (Derrida 1989: 99). *Reaktivierung* is an act of responsibility and a sense investigation because it "permits bringing to life [...] sense" (ibid), which is "reanimated by the fact that I restore it to its dependence on my act and reproduce it in myself such as it had been produced for the first time by another" (ibid). Whereas crisis names the ego's passive acceptance of tradition, reactivation means taking responsibility for re-producing the sense of the world as if for the first time.

Second, reactivation is the methodological approach of Husserl's historical phenomenology, one of whose necessary steps is the reduction of empiricism. The purpose of historical phenomenology is to reawaken the origin of the sense of tradition. This origin, however, is not a factual historical event accessible to empirical history. Derrida says, "no more than the history of its transmissions grounds the value of gold, can worldly history give the sense of this circulation [of sense] as common coin, since, on the contrary, history supposes it" (Derrida 1989: 51). The problem with the factual or empirical study of history is that it presupposes what is in question, that is, the senses of origin, fact, history, science, and tradition, which it unquestioningly employs in its own investigations. Furthermore, historicism can "teach us nothing about the truth of [the tradition] or its sense of origin" (Derrida 1989: 35). The reason is that by making sense dependent on external conditions like worldviews, power relations, or material conditions, empirical history cannot account for truth, which is, Husserl maintains, universally valid regardless of historical epochs. On the contrary, empirical history leads to a "relativism incapable of ensuring its own truth" (Derrida 2001b: 199) because it cannot justify its claims if every claim is historically relative.

To circumvent the relativism of empirical or factual history, Husserl "suspend[s] the ontological and theoretical commitments of the 'natural attitude,' up to and including the very belief in a world independent of consciousness – an operation Husserl terms the 'transcendental *epoche*' or 'reduction'" (Dews 1987: 5). This reduction, which is never fully complete, "neutrali[ses] the act by which I posit, affirm, or deny the existence of the world as I do in the [...]

attitude [...] of the scientist" (Derrida 2003: 112). The facticity of the world, the sciences, and all their products are not negated or doubted but simply set aside by the phenomenologist. This also brackets historicism and empirical history, which does not mean that Husserl disregards history *in general*. His *Reaktivierung* is a historical endeavour, but the history he is interested in is "transcendental and not empirical" (Derrida 2003: 110).

The reduction gives Husserl access to the transcendental correlation in which consciousness encounters and produces the sense of the world; the sense whose origin he seeks to reproduce. The first step in reaching that origin is Husserl's "*static* analysis" undertaken in *Ideas I*. Part of the historico-methodological significance of that text is, Derrida says, that it is where sense is 'fixed' (cf. Derrida 1989: 50n55), that is, where the distinctiveness of sense – its ideality, namely, its independence of all empiricity and empirical subjectivity, and its correlation with the noetic acts of a transcendental subjectivity – is determined. This is a crucial step because the sense fixed in static phenomenology will guide the reawakening of the acts that correlated with and produced it (Derrida 1989: 50-51, 55n50). These acts are precisely the originary acts of sense-production that historical phenomenology seeks to reactivate.

Third, reactivation is also a historical act that partakes in and advances transcendental history. In the *Crisis*, Husserl affirms that transcendental history has a sense, a direction, or *telos*. It is directed to truth, which is valid for all, always, and everywhere. Empiricism cannot contribute to this kind of history, for it leads to relativism. Galileo's mathematisation of nature, by contrast, contributed to it because it idealised nature (turning its objects, shapes and forms into ideal objects, shapes and forms that are infinitely repeatable as the same). Descartes did as much by singling out the cogito as the foundational methodological basis of philosophy. Husserl also aims to reinstitute the *telos* of transcendental history, although not 'blindly' (cf. Derrida 1989: 36), as Galileo and Descartes did. Rather, he seeks his reawakening act to "assum[e] greater possession of its [historicity's] own essence" (Derrida 1989: 115) by taking up the ethical task of *Reaktivierung*, and developing novel methodological tools for the study of a history of sense. Unlike factual or empirical history, "intentional and intrinsic history" (Derrida 1989: 51) – or transcendental history – does not establish causal relations, nor does it "tell [...] a story" (Derrida 1989: 65). It is also not an idealist history as is Hegel's, which unfolds an absolute independently of the subject's activity.[4] Intentional and intrinsic history, says Derrida, "is not an Absolute that *first* exists in the plenitude of its essence and then descends into history or becomes disclosed in a subjectivity whose acts would not be intrinsically indispensable to it" (Derrida 1989: 142). On the contrary, subjective acts are essential to intentional and intrinsic history, though not those of an empirical subject, but of a transcendental, sense-producing

4 David Carr says, "For Hegel the teleology of Europe is a process that happens outside of us individuals, and goes on whether we are for it or against it" (Carr 2016: 134).

subject. By reawakening the originary production of sense, Husserl's historical investigation partakes in the making of transcendental history.

The three significations of Husserl's *Reaktivierung* – ethical, historico-methodological and historico-practical – are retained *and* transformed in Derrida's work. Here, however, I focus only on the latter two[5].

First, like Husserl's *Reaktivierung*, Derrida's reactivation is a *historico*-methodological approach. In the "Origin of Geometry," Husserl seeks to reawaken the originary production of the geometrical sense by first reducing the facticity of geometry in order to determine its essence, its *eidos*. This *eidos* functions as the guide leading him back to the intentional acts that produced it. This means that Husserl reproduces or repeats the internal and intentional history that produced geometry only backwards – hence 'reactivation'. Derrida proceeds analogously, though not with geometry, but with phenomenology which, as I explain below, represents for Derrida the essence of the tradition of metaphysics. He repeats phenomenology in order to reach its originary production, which Derrida terms *différance*. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida states, "to think play radically the ontological and transcendental problematics must first be seriously *exhausted*; [...] the critical movement of the Husserlian and Heideggerian questions must be effectively *followed to the very end*, *and their effectiveness and legibility must be conserved*" (Derrida 1976: 50, second italics added). Immediately after these lines, he explains the reasons for following through to the very end, conserving, and exhausting the Husserlian and Heideggerian critical movements[6]: "Even if it [the ontological and transcendental problematics] were crossed out, without it the concepts of play and writing to which I shall have recourse will remain caught within regional limits and an empiricist, positivist, or metaphysical discourse" (Derrida 1976: 50). Derrida's first reason for 'following' and 'conserving' transcendental phenomenology is that Husserl's critique of empiricism and 'degenerate' metaphysics ensures his own *historical* concepts of play and writing are free from any remnants of empiricism, and the particular kind of metaphysics Husserl questions. Derrida undertakes this conservation or, more precisely, repetition of Husserl's phenomenology in his Introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, which, Derrida explicitly states, is *not* intended to question phenomenology, but is rather "guided by his [Husserl's] own intentions" (Derrida 1989: 27).

The second reason for following and conserving Husserl's phenomenology is both the *de facto* and *de jure historico*-methodological necessity of beginning from the tradition as Derrida encounters it. Just as Husserl could not directly reawaken the originary sense-giving acts of transcendental subjectivity because they lay beneath layers of sedimentation, and therefore had to begin

5 See Pérez León (2024) for a discussion of the specifically ethical sense of *Reaktivierung* as *philosophical responsibility* in Derrida's work.

6 I deliberately bracket Derrida's relation to Heidegger. For Derrida, Husserl's phenomenology holds juridical priority over Heidegger's ontology, but justifying this requires a separate treatment that goes beyond this article's scope.

from the natural attitude and inherited tradition, which he reduced, Derrida likewise begins from, moves through, and completes phenomenology's trajectory in order to move beyond it. For Derrida, Husserl's phenomenology paradigmatically represents the tradition of metaphysics, for it is both a powerful criticism and reduction of empiricism and "historically degenerate" (Husserl cited in Derrida 2003: 105) idealism and metaphysics, *and* the restoration of philosophy's *original* mission: "the Platonic ideal of philosophy as [episteme] and [...] the Aristotelian project of [first philosophy]" (Derrida 2003: 105). By reducing empiricism and degenerate metaphysics *and* reawakening the 'original mission' of philosophy, Husserl's phenomenology embodies, by Husserl's own criteria, the *eidos* of philosophy. Just as Husserl's static investigations first fixed the distinctiveness of sense that later guided him to its originary constitutive acts, Derrida's repetition of Husserl's phenomenology fixes the essential sense of the metaphysical tradition whose deeper *historical possibility* he seeks.

Repeating phenomenology, however, is not simply a first step on the way to *différance*, a ladder to be discarded. On the contrary, Derrida explicitly states the necessity of 'conserving' phenomenology. The repetition of phenomenology is best understood as a reduction operating as retention. The reduction is a "temporal act" (Derrida 2003a: 64) that at once begins anew *and* retains the past; it "conserves what it suspends" (Derrida 2003a: 71). Referring to the reduction of inherited geometry, Derrida says, "This reduction needs as its starting point the constituted result it neutralises. There must always already have been the fact of a history of geometry, so that the reduction can be performed" (Derrida 1989: 38). The retained history becomes necessary to the new beginning. The same holds for Derrida's relation to phenomenology and for the relation between transcendental history and *différance*: Derrida's philosophy *has* to negotiate with the tradition it reduces just as *différance has* to negotiate with the *telos* of Reason. However, this necessary negotiation does not leave the tradition unchanged, for its reduction entails its transformation.

Understood as a reduction in the relevant sense, Derrida's repetition of phenomenology is a *historical* and internal critique of the tradition of metaphysics of which phenomenology is the originary form. Unlike Derrida's *historico*-methodological approach, radical historicism, like empiricism, attacks philosophy externally by challenging its claims to universality with factual and material constraints. In doing so, empiricism undermines itself, as it cannot justify its claims without relying on philosophical presuppositions and concepts (cf. also Žižek 2000: 102). While radical and traditional historicisms begin with a naïve view of philosophy, Derrida's *historical* methodological schema adopts Husserl's reduction of this naïve view and empiricism in order to determine the essential sense of the tradition of metaphysics. Derrida thus proceeds much as Husserl does in establishing the distinctiveness of sense in static phenomenology. Further, for radical and traditional historicisms, history consists of causally connected historical facts and events. For Derrida, as for Husserl, *history* is neither empirical nor ideal, both of which Husserl's phenomenology brackets.

The following section examines where Derrida diverges from phenomenology to articulate an *other history*, which he terms *différance*, and transform transcendentality into the 'quasi-transcendental.'

## The Reduction of Phenomenology, *Différance* and the Quasi-transcendental.

Derrida's reactivation of Husserl's reduction of empiricism and historicism risks being misinterpreted as as negating history in general and advancing another metaphysics, thus compromising his critical intent and supposed radicality. This is the interpretive route Dews takes, offering a sharp criticism of Derrida's philosophy as a form of metaphysics. He claims, "Derrida's deconstruction does not seek to *challenge* or *transform*" (Dews 1987: 37) transcendental philosophy, "but rather seeks to lay bare its structure" (ibid), and thereby "occup[y] a position of superior insight" (ibid). In this way, it "*preser[ves]* the security and priority of philosophical discourse" (ibid; cf. also Dews 1988: 167-169).

Dews recognises, however, that Derrida is aware of the metaphysical impression his *historical* methodological schema may evoke. He cites Derrida's claim that his critical text "'will so closely resemble the pre-critical text as to be indistinguishable from it'" (Derrida cited in Dews 1987: 24). This awareness, I argue, attests to the deliberate nature of the resemblance. This resemblance results from the methodological and *historical* necessity of beginning from the tradition in order to undertake an internal critique of phenomenology, gather its critical gains against empiricism and degenerate metaphysics, and step into transcendental history. This *historical* necessity certainly gives phenomenology and metaphysics more generally a structural role in Derrida's philosophy. Still, this is only a resemblance. Although Dews is right that Derrida aims to uncover the structure of the tradition of metaphysics, this does not mean climbing up to the heights of an absolute with the intention of securing the priority of philosophy as Dews affirms. It consists rather in taking an unprejudiced look at phenomenology as a "*discourse of method*" (Derrida 2003: 111) as such, namely, as a *discourse* determined by a tradition "which subordinates a reflection on the sign to a logic" (Derrida 1973: 7) and "gives a theory of knowledge the authority to determine the essence and origin of language" (ibid). Taking phenomenology as a *historical* discourse involves reducing phenomenology to signification *and* extracting the concept of 'sign' from the tradition that overdetermines it as secondary. Far from encumbering philosophy, these two methodological movements lower it to the level of language (cf. Derrida 1976: lxxxix).

The following sections reconstruct the argumentative steps leading to Derrida's reduction of phenomenology and the disclosure of its deeper *historicity* or *différance*. The final subsection returns to Dews' criticisms through a discussion of the quasi-transcendental.

### a) The *telos* of Reason and phōnē

In the *Introduction*, Derrida undertakes a 'synoptic retrospection' of Husserl's phenomenology up to the originary act that reawakens the *telos* of Reason. This experience is, I claim, *phōnē* or the experience of hearing(understanding)-oneself-speak(think) whose possibility Derrida questions in *Speech and Phenomena*. The *telos* of Reason was originarily instituted by the philosopher's theoretical attitude, "which authorises a move beyond finitude and opens the horizon of knowledge as that of [...] an infinite project or task" (Derrida 1989: 127). The theoretical attitude is an idealisation or passage to the limit, which, like the phenomenological reduction, discards all sensibility, empiricity and subjectivity in order to attend to objects as ideal objects. Although ideality admits of different levels (cf. Derrida 1989: 69-72), logical and mathematical idealities are exemplary of universal transcendental historicity because, being independent of all empiricity or subjectivity, they can be repeated as the same *ad infinitum*. Infinity is the temporality of ideal objectivities, which means that idealisation is at the same time an infinitisation, an opening to the infinite project "of a universal Telos" (Derrida 1989: 131). Idealisation is, Derrida says emphatically, "the openness of history *itself*" (ibid). Husserl aims to re-produce this founding act as if for the first timebut with full awareness of it as an infinitising historical act prescribed by the universal *telos*. Such awareness has to rest on the evidence of the *telos* as an Idea in the Kantian sense, that is, as the regulative idea uniting and directing all future idealisations and reactivations.

The Idea in the Kantian sense, however, "never phenomenalises itself" (Derrida 1989: 137) and its evidence cannot abide by phenomenology's principle of principle whose "archetypal form of evidence [is] the immediate presence of the thing itself 'in person'" (Derrida 1989: 137-138). Although the Idea cannot be given to the gaze, it has "'a *type of evidence that is its own*'" (Derrida 1989: 139), which is "absolutely exceptional in phenomenology" (ibid). Derrida says, "[t]he Idea is the pole of a pure intention, empty of every determined content. It alone reveals, then, the being of the intention: *intentionality* itself" (ibid). Intentionality is the Idea's unique evidence because it is, like transcendental history, a directedness to an object regardless of whether the object is apprehended. Since intentionality itself is the evidence of a norm or a formal prescription, rather than of an object, "for once, nothing appears" (ibid). The Idea "can never be given in a philosophy of seeing, but (like all Speech) can only be heard or understood through the visible" (Derrida 1989: 141) – that is, through a 'diaphanous' expressive sign which is "visible, and yet not visible in itself" (Derrida 1989: 138).

This evidence is given in what Husserl terms "*phōnē*" (Derrida 1973: 10), "pure expression" (Derrida 1973: 40) or "solitary mental life" (Derrida 1973: 22). Pure expression is a distinctive experience because consciousness ex-presses without speaking, communicating, using signs, or abandoning the sphere of what is its own. It is an 'externalisation' within 'immanence.' Husserl goes to great lengths to demonstrate its possibility. The crux of his demonstration

rests on the subject's absolute proximity and immediacy to itself, such that its intention "is immediately present to the subject in the present moment" (Derrida 1973: 48).

According to Husserl, sense is constituted in "intellectual thought processes" (Derrida 1989: 133n155), and it is essentially "pre-expressive" (Derrida 1973: 74). Only later is sense "expressed in the fixed meaning of the definitory expression" (Derrida 1989: 133n155), readying it for further communication. Pure ex-pression ensures the identity and "transmissibility" (Derrida 1973: 81) of sense by imbuing phonetic signs with the subjective intention to mean it[7]. *Phōnē* can reflect sense back to consciousness unspoiled because "phonic signs [...] are heard [...] by the subject who proffers them in the absolute proximity of the present" (Derrida 1973: 76). Moreover, the instantaneous character of pure expression reduces the sign's body or signifier so that only its spiritual content is conveyed: "the signifier [is] in absolute proximity to the signified [...] [thus] becom[ing] perfectly diaphanous" (Derrida 1973: 80). By reducing signifiers, *phōnē* or the phenomenological voice reduces all space, "accomplish[ing] this operation 'in time'" (Derrida 1973: 75). Pure expression is, thus, "an 'unproductive' 'medium' which 'reflects' (*wiederzuspiegeln*) the pre-expressive stratum of sense" (Derrida 1973: 74). For Husserl, writing performs "the same role" (Derrida 1973: 81) at the level of history as *phōnē* does within consciousness: transmitting a self-identical sense.

### b) The irreducibility of signs and the incompletion of phōnē

Derrida calls into question the instantaneousness of this experience and, by extension, the self-identity of sense and self, drawing on Husserl's own descriptions. Derrida emphasises that sense is "temporal in nature" (Derrida 1973: 85), so its perception must also be temporal; it must endure. Husserl affirms, "'it belongs to the essence of lived experiences that they must be extended [...], that a punctual phase can never be for itself" [*ITC*, § 19; ET, p. 70]" (Husserl cited in Derrida 1973: 61). As extended, immanent temporality requires that the now "'continually accommodat[es]'" (Husserl cited in Derrida 1973: 65) to the not-now of retention and protention, whose synthesis makes the object appear as an identical unity. *Despite this recognition*, Husserl attempts to preserve the priority of present evidence by describing retention and protention as modifications of presence. He thus disregards his previous description in order to maintain that retention is actually a "perception" (Derrida 1973: 64). Moreover, he draws an essential distinction between retention or primary remembrance, which preserves present evidence, and representation or secondary memory, which does not (cf. Derrida 1973: 66).

7 Derrida notes that, for the most part and unlike Frege, Husserl used the words sense and meaning interchangeably. But, for clarity purposes, he did dissociate these terms: "*meaning* is reserved for the content in the ideal sense of *verbal* expressions, spoken language, while sense (*Sinn*) covers the whole noematic sphere right down to its non-expressive stratum" (Derrida 1973: 19)

This is Husserl's key move, for only by treating retention as perception can pure expression be an unproductive medium occurring in 'the present'. Pure expression functions as retention because its purpose is to receive and reflect sense back to the subject in a single present so that no signs and, therefore, no space separate the sense-producing subject from the sense-expressing subject. Only in this way can the identity of sense and the self be secured. If retention is perception, expression likewise preserves the present evidence and ensures the identity of both sense and self. If, as Derrida argues, retention is *not* perception, expression cannot transmit sense and secure the self-identity of the subject's intention. Instead, it repeats or represents a non-present intention in an*other* now. As such, there can be no radical difference between retention and representation, for both have a "common root" in "the possibility of re-petition in its most general form" (Derrida 1973: 67). As re-petition, neither retention nor representation merely reflects. Both are "modifications of nonperception [...] ways of relating to the irreducible nonpresence of another now" (Derrida 1973: 65).

Defining expression as repetition restores signifiers to the immanent space of consciousness. Pure expression made the signifier diaphanous because of its supposed proximity to the signified: "This effacement of the sensible body and its exteriority is *for consciousness* the very form of the immediate presence of the signified" (cf. Derrida 1973: 77). It is on this basis that Husserl describes *phōnē* as "the absolute reduction of space in general" (Derrida 1973: 79). If, however, retention is repetition rather than perception, the spaceless intimacy of *phōnē* collapses, and the signifier can no longer be effaced. On the contrary, it is at the core of consciousness and it occupies space, which is the space of indication, for, as Husserl states, "only indication takes place [...] across space" (Derrida 1973: 40). In this way, Derrida "assimilat[es] the necessity of retention and the necessity of signs" (Derrida 1973: 66).

The necessity of signs, or, put differently, the irreducibility of writing – "the common name for signs" (Derrida 1973: 93) – prevents the actualisation of pure expression and thereby reduces the entire phenomenological edifice: its method, the structure of consciousness, transcendental history, and the metaphysical concept of writing or sign. Against a common interpretation (cf. Doyon 2014: 138; Marrati 2005: 2; Lawlor 2002: 47-48), this reduction does *not* entail a return to factual history or empiricism, for Derrida's reactivation of Husserl's reduction of empiricism is not cancelled after the collapse of phenomenology. Furthermore, in *Of Grammatology* and "Signature, Event, Context," Derrida effectively undertakes an eidetic reduction of writing aimed at fixing its essence. "Signature, Event, Context" is explicitly guided by the question "what [...] is the essential predicate of this *specific* difference [of writing]?" (Derrida 1988a: 6). The essence of writing is its ability to repeat itself and produce significations in the absence of subject, object and context of production and reception. This does not mean that subjects, objects, or contexts are *in fact* absent, or infinite significations are *in fact* produced. Rather, this absence and infinite production define writing's essential structure. Later, I explain why Derrida's reduction, despite its resemblance to Husserl's, is not phenomenological.

### c) *Différance*: the reduction of consciousness and the concept of sign

As *Speech and Phenomena* makes clear, *phōnē* is not one experience among others but the possibility of consciousness. Derrida says, "[N]o consciousness is possible without the voice. The voice is the being which is present to itself in the form of universality, as con-sciousness; the voice *is* consciousness" (Derrida 1973: 79-80). *Phōnē* is supposed to make consciousness possible by reflecting the identity of its intention back to itself, allowing the subject to "understan[d] his own expressive intention" (Derrida 1973: 78) as it is produced. Drawing on Husserl's own descriptions, Derrida argues that pure expression is repetition, carrying no present evidence of subjective intention. Without the reflection pure expression was supposed to perform, consciousness cannot experience itself as self-identical. Derrida says, "[t]here is no constituting subjectivity" (Derrida 1973: 84n9), and "without it [subjectivity]," Derrida says, "no world *as such* would appear" (Derrida 1973: 79). Neither consciousness nor sense can be experienced in the present.

But if consciousness was not complete from the beginning, how was *phōnē* supposed to reflect it back to it? If sense was not originally identical to itself, how was *phōnē* meant to fix it into words (cf. Derrida 1982: 16)? Derrida's answer to these questions extracts the concepts of sign, consciousness and sense from their metaphysical milieu; he dis-places them. Traditionally, the sign is treated as a secondary medium tasked with transmitting a ready-made subjective intention to mean. Presupposed in this concept is the self-identity and self-sufficiency of both the subject and the meaning. Yet this is *precisely* what the irreducibility of signs calls into question. Derrida says, "auto-affection is not a modality of experience that characterises a being that would already be itself (*autos*). It produces sameness as self-relation within self-difference; it produces sameness as the nonidentical" (Derrida 1973: 82). The identity of the self and the object does not precede but rather emerges as a representation constituted in a continuous interplay of retentions gathering past experiences and protentions projecting future ones, which themselves were retentions in an anterior past, and so forth *ad infinitum*. Derrida says, "the self … is primordially a trace… [and] [s]ense [...] is always already engaged in the 'movement' of the trace, that is, in the order of 'signification'" (Derrida 1973: 85). The irreducibility of writing thus reduces the metaphysical conception of consciousness as full possession of itself, and of sense as issuing from consciousness.

Without antecedent consciousness and sense, the naïve concept of sign is also reduced, for it can no longer be defined as a secondary means for the transmission of a self-identical intention. Derrida says, "we are faced with mimicry imitating nothing: faced [...] with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing *at least* that is not itself already double" (Derrida 2004: 217; cf. Derrida 1973: 83). Derrida defines signs as mimicry, imitation, representation preceded by nothing other than mimicry, imitation, and representation. This highly unorthodox view of signs, Derrida says, "amounts

to destroying the concept of 'sign' and its entire logic" (Derrida 1976: 7)[8]. Yet, sign's essential emptiness is not sterile. On the contrary, it is "pure production" (Derrida 1973: 83). Husserl already defines signs as "signifying relations" (Derrida 1973: 20): expression means by relating to consciousness's intention, indication signifies by relating to other signs. The reduction of consciousness and meaning reduces expression also, but not indication. Insofar as indication is not limited by either consciousness or sense, signs can produce infinitely new significations; a characteristic Derrida terms 'overwhelming. He states, "this *overwhelming* supervenes at the moment when the extension of the concept of language effaces all its limits [...] [T]his overwhelming and this effacement have the same meaning, are one and the same phenomenon" (Derrida 1976: 7). This does not mean that signs *actually* generate infinite differentiations, only that this possibility of overwhelming and effacement of limits belongs to their essence.

The operation of signification defined as "the indefinite drift of signs, as errance and change of scene (*Verwandlung*), linking re-presentations (*Vergegenwärtigung*) one to another without beginning or end" (Derrida 1973: 103), describes the structure of *différance*[9], which, I argue, is the *historicity* of signification. In "Différance," Derrida describes this operation as "*spacing*, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space (*temporisation*)" (Derrida 1982: 13). This formulation captures the operation I just described. Space or signs become time because their emptiness is the possibility of producing ever new differentiations, indefinitely deferring the possibility of self-identity. As such, no self-identity appears or phenomenalises itself. The emptiness or finitude of signs is therefore an essential openness or infinity, which is a form of temporality. Time in turn becomes space because this deferral is productive of significations, of more space. Again, *différance* names not a factual process but the essence of signification or writing.

### d) *Différance* as *history*, and the reduction of the reduction

The resemblance between *différance* and Husserl's description of transcendental historicity is significant. As argued throughout this essay, it shows *historical* and methodological necessities. For Husserl, idealities are the possibility of the repetition of the same to infinity (cf. Derrida 1973: 9). The flow of consciousness comprises all possible experiences extending back and forth to infinity (cf. Derrida 2003a: 97-98). The *telos* of Reason gathers and sanctions these infinities in a universal history of reactivations that bring higher levels of idealisation to infinity (cf. Derrida 1989: 137). Yet infinity cannot as such be phenomenalised as a totality in the present: its *Endstiftung* is "indefinitely deferred in

8 Derrida does not stick to one single word to indicate the operation of signification, which itself shows that "words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences" (Derrida 1976:70)

9 Derrida uses the word *differance* interchangeably with others like "arche-writing, arche-trace" (Derrida 1982: 13).

its content but always evident in its regulative value" (Derrida 1989: 138). Its regulative value, as discussed earlier, is the Idea in the Kantian sense, whose exceptional form of evidence is *phōnē*. *Différance* likewise names an essential deferral to infinity in which no consciousness, object, or content appears. Despite their resemblance, a fundamental difference separates these two 'histories,' although they are, like parallels, 'alongside' each other. Explaining the reduction of transcendental history and phenomenology can clarify their relation.

The failure of *phōnē*, brought about by the irreducibility of signs, also reduces transcendental history and phenomenology, disclosed at the end of its itinerary as a transcendental historical act. Within historical phenomenology, *phōnē* has two functions. First, it reactivates the *telos* of Reason in 'full possession of its essence' by making the Idea evident as the regulative directedness to truth. Secondly, it grounds phenomenology in "original self-giving evidence" (Derrida 1973: 5), even if this evidence is heard rather than seen. The impossibility of this experience means that transcendental history can neither complete itself nor can phenomenology ground itself in present evidence. The essential incompleteness of transcendental history is analogous to the incompleteness of *phōnē*, for both are movements intended to re-capture sense. In the *Introduction*, Derrida explains that writing secures "the absolute traditionalisation of the object" (Derrida 1989: 87) by making "communication become virtual" (ibid). Yet this is *not* a recognition of writing as historically constitutive, since this role "is only possible precisely from the *moment* truth *can* in general be said or written" (Derrida 1989: 90). This 'moment' is the instant of *phōnē*, which is supposed to prepare the self-identity of sense for oral and written communication. Once *phōnē* fails, however, the historical restriction placed on writing as a medium of transmission is reduced, and writing's full rights as a condition for traditionalisation are fully restored. What remains after the "death of speech (of *so-called* full speech)," says Derrida, is "*history* as writing" (Derrida 1976: 8, second italics added): the essential openness and productivity of the operation of signification. It is this operation which, "should the occasion arise, produces 'philosophy'" (Derrida 1973: 25).

The reduction of phenomenology also reduces its foundational methodological tool: the reduction itself. Phenomenology stands on the possibility of drawing an essential distinction between the *de facto* and the *de jure*, the empirical and the transcendental, exteriority and interiority. For Husserl, 'essence' or *eidos* is an ideality, which is the being-for-consciousness that can be repeated as the same *ad infinitum* and, as such, precedes and sanctions *de jure* everything the reduction suspends. But it is precisely the closedness of interiority, of being-for-consciousness that *différance* bursts open. *Différance*, says Derrida, "is the intimate relation of the living present with its outside, the openness upon exteriority in general [...] *the temporalisation of sense is, from the outset, a 'spacing'*" (Derrida 1973: 86). *Differance* is the essential *Verflechtung*, the contamination of interiority and exteriority. Yet Derrida insists, "it does not follow [...] that there is now only one term, a single one of the differends [...] It is the difference between the two that is no longer functional [...]

it eliminates the exteriority or anteriority, the independence, of the imitated, the signified, or the thing" (Derrida 2004: 220). Instead, the emptiness and relationality of signs results in an essential superabundance of possible differences with differential force or ability to repeat.

The reduction of phenomenology should not be interpreted as its negation or exclusion. As discussed earlier, Derrida insists on the *historical* and *historico*-methodological necessity of *repeating* phenomenology to the end in order to reveal its profound *historicity* or *différance*. Now, this necessity can be better understood as *historical*. Earlier I said the reduction was a 'temporal act,' functioning not as exclusion but as retention. Derrida says, "to the degree that this act lasts, it must negotiate with the determinate temporality that it 'retains', with the history that it assumes, in order to know itself as a free act. Its impurity is originary because it is *a priori* temporal" (Derrida 2003a: 64-65). Although this free act is for Derrida "the freedom or 'candour' [...] of language" (Derrida 1973: 97) rather than of the subject as in phenomenology, the necessity of negotiating with, and conserving, the past that the reduction understood as retention entails is at work throughout Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, too.

From *Of Grammatology* onwards, this necessity no longer takes the form of repeating phenomenology as such. Rather, it takes the form of the necessity of using the metaphysical language to question metaphysics. Derrida emphasises its *historical* force: "*There is no sense 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" (Derrida 2001c: 354, italics in the original). This does not mean that phenomenology in particular or the language of metaphysics in general is maintained without change, for, like Husserl's reduction, Derrida's reduction seeks to reveal the essence of what it reduces. Derrida says, "The age already in the *past* is in fact constituted in every respect as a *text*" (Derrida 1976: lxxxix). This also applies to the reduction itself, and the vocabulary of essences and necessities that Derrida continues to employ. The method of the reduction in Derrida's work draws textual differences with differential force with the intention to show *différance* as *history*. "[W]riting," Derrida says, "is the 'critical epoch'" (Derrida 2001b: 208). The *truth* of this critical epoch is the essential emptiness of subject, object, perception, and self-identical sense that makes the infinite openness and productivity of differences possible.

### e) Quasi-transcendental and a response to Dews' criticisms

Derrida describes *différance* as quasi-transcendental, defining it as a condition of possibility that is simultaneously a condition of impossibility. The secondary literature generally interprets this phrase as the constitutive contamination between opposites. Gasché, for instance, defines the quasi-transcendental as "the necessary corruption of the idealities, or transcendentals of all sorts, by what they are defined against, and at the very moment of their constitution"

(Gasché 1986: 274; see also Doyon 2014: 135; Kramer 2014: 522). This interpretation applies to *différance* viewed as an operation of representation of representations whose essential emptiness and productivity reduce metaphysics' essential distinctions. It does *not*, however, apply to the term quasi-transcendental, not least because it does not explain how to understand a condition of possibility which is simultaneously a condition of impossibility.

Bennington comes close to the correct interpretation, though it is ultimately mistaken on account of being empirical. He says, "my finitude makes (im) possible my transcendence. I think, therefore I am, and before you know it I'm essentially an immortal thinking substance, though only the possibility of my death makes this possible and thus impossible" (Bennington 1988: 102). In other words, finitude makes the subject (and everything it implies in modern philosophy) both possible and impossible. As a formula, this is the correct interpretation. The problem is that, like Llewelyn, Bennington understands finitude empirically, "'as factual anthropological limit'" (Llewelyn cited in Bennington 1988: 101). The meaning of finitude is actually a point of disagreement between Gasché and Bennington. Gasché explicitly argues that 'quasi-transcendentals' are not finite (Gasché 1986: 317) on account of "Derrida's persistent critique of the notion of finitude" (ibid). Bennington, by contrast, recalls Derrida's 'enigmatic' claim in *Speech and Phenomena* that "infinite *différance* is itself finite" (Derrida 1973: 102), and asks "Are we dealing with two different notions of infinity here?" (Bennington 1988: 95). He leaves the question unanswered, but the answer could not only resolve their disagreement on this point, but also contribute to the clarification of the term quasi-transcendental.

Derrida employs at least three senses of finitude. First, finitude as the character of having a beginning and end, with both an empirical variation (factual death and birth (see Derrida 2003a: 95, also 110)), and an essential or existential one, broadly Heideggerian (see Derrida 2003a: 98, 98n89). The second is formal finitude, exemplified by the set of mathematical axioms generating an infinite series of deductions (see Derrida 1989: 127-129). The third is the finitude of *différance*, which is the essence of writing, namely, the essential absence of object, subject, and context of production or reception of signs, which makes an infinite production of differentiations unrestricted by truth or objectivity possible. This finitude is the absence of metaphysical origin and *telos* that makes the infinity of *différance* possible.

*Différance*'s finitude is extensively discussed in the final chapter of *Speech and Phenomena* as the non-necessary fulfilment of the subject's intention in an intuition of the object, and as the absolute absence, or death, of the subject. It is there that Derrida first formulates the phrase "possibility is [...] impossibility" (Derrida 1973: 101). This chapter's argumentative structure provides the interpretive key to this phrase and, with it, to the meaning of the term 'quasi-transcendental.' The same structure reappears in "Signature, Event, Context."

The argumentative structure becomes clearer if we ask, 'in what sense does *différance*'s finitude make sense possible?' Sticking with *phōnē* as phenomenology's foundational experience, *différance* makes *phōnē* possible only *symbolically*,

as "a representation of a representation" (Derrida 1973: 103), as "*a scene, a theatre stage*" (Derrida 1973: 86). *Différance*, says Derrida, is "a primordial 'supplement' [...] *mak*[*ing*] *up for* a deficiency, [...] compensat[ing] for primordial nonself-presence" (Derrida 1973: 87). The supplement functions "by delayed reaction[:] *a possibility produces that to which it is said to be added on*" (Derrida 1973: 89, italics added). The operation of signification takes the place of consciousness in the sense of *Räpresentation*: "the for-itself of self-presence [...] arises in the role of supplement as primordial substitution, in the form of 'in the place of' (*für etwas*), that is, [...] in the very operation of significance in general" (ibid). Neither self nor sense arrive at the experience of *phōnē* as self-identical; rather, they require *phōnē* to become such. *Phōnē*'s failure reveals both sense and self as a trace: a representation of representation. It is *in this sense* that *différance* makes *phōnē* (and everything this experience implies) possible.

How does *différance*'s finitude make sense impossible? Because the representation of representation "function[s] [in] the total absence of the subject" (Derrida 1973: 93) and "the absence of perception" (ibid) of the object, the subjects' intention to recapture itself and the object cannot be fulfilled in an intuition. *Différance*, thus, makes *phōnē*, which consists in this fulfilment, impossible. Regardless of whether intention is actually fulfilled, for Husserl's phenomenology fulfillment remains the norm or regulative *telos* of both self-consciousness and transcendental history: "the telos which announces the fulfilment, [...], has already and beforehand opened up essence as a relation with the object [...]" (Derrida 1973: 98). Derrida continues, "The norm is knowledge, the intuition that is adequate to its object, the evidence that is not only distinct but also 'clear'" (ibid). This *telos* is precisely what *différance* reduces, thus making it impossible – other than as a representation.

The quasi-transcendental can now be read precisely: *différance* makes *phōnē* (and everything it entails) possible as a representation of representation. Yet, because subject and object are essentially absent in a representation of representation, it makes *phōnē*, the fulfilment of the intention to perceive, impossible.

I turn now to Dews' criticisms of Derrida's philosophy, to which the clarification of the quasi-transcendental helps respond. Two arguments support Dews' criticisms. First, Dews affirms that Derrida questions the idea of 'ground' "*only* insofar as he considers the concept of origin, in its philosophical function, to be inseparable from that of presence" (Dews 1987: 25). Without presence, *différance* "can no longer perform the *epistemological function* of an origin" (ibid.) but can still serve as the "unconditioned source of the structures of experience" (Dews 1988: 172). Second, although Derrida is generally presented as "the thinker of uncancellable difference" (Dews 1987: 26), Dews argues that *différance* "collapses into absolute identity" (Dews 1987: 27). He compares Derrida's argumentation to Schelling's, who maintains that metaphysical dualisms "ca[n] [...] be defeated [...] only by going beyond the duality" (ibid) into "a state of 'absolute indifference' (*absolute Indifferenz*) with regard to all determinations" (Dews 1988: 171). Dews highlights that Derrida "explicitly equates '*différance* within auto-affection' with the 'identity of identity and non-identity'"

(Dews 1987: 27). Moreover, in "The Double Session," "he [Derrida] speaks of the abolition of 'the difference between difference and nondifference'" (ibid). The conclusion Dews draws is that Derrida "is offering us a philosophy of *différance* as the absolute" (Dews 1987: 24).

Dews agrees that in Derrida's case, the term origin is not a simple presence or its opposite, and it is neither identity nor difference. For Derrida, he says, "the identity of meaning is no less a condition of difference, in other words, than difference is a condition of identity" (Dews 1987: 28). This means, as Dews rightly points out, that "identity and difference are not opposed to each other in the manner they have often been conceived to be" (ibid). Identity and difference are not opposed in the sense that the former cannot be said to precede and command, or exclude and suppress the latter *essentially*. In a certain sense, they are regarded as having equal value, and Derrida certainly reduces the essentiality – in Husserl's sense – of their distinction. Yet that does not mean that differences are now reconciled or unified, or that all differences are the same. On the contrary, *différance* indicates the essential multiplication of differences. The reduction of essential differences does not mean either that *différance* is the source of all differences. When Derrida describes *différance* as the nonoriginary origin, he is indicating that differences, including those organising the discourse of phenomenology and philosophy generally, 'start' *a priori in media historia*. The *a priori is* the always already of the *history* of signification that no metaphysical origin restricts: neither knowledge, truth, objectivity, nor self-consciousness. For the same reason, this *history* is essentially open to infinity and always to come.

Significantly, Dews himself entertains an alternative interpretation, one that sees Derrida not as seeking a stronger, higher foundation for metaphysics, but as destroying its foundations through the destruction of meaning. He says, "[f]or Derrida no term or text is the bearer of a self-evident meaning. This meaning must be instituted through a further term or text, and the meaning of this in turn by a further term or text" (Dews 1987: 30). The "logical consequence" of this view, Dews continues, "is not the volatilisation of meaning, but its destruction" (ibid). This interpretation is correct, I believe, provided that the 'meaning' destroyed is Husserl's, namely, meaning as preceding the sign and incapable of being lost. This destruction, however, is not catastrophic for two reasons. The first reason is that *différance* supplements the lack of an ever-present sense. Institutionalisations, conventions, consensuses and the like are supplements, that is, stabilisations of interpretations, "sometimes stabilisations of great duration, sometimes micro-stabilisations" (Derrida 1996: 86). Derrida's point in articulating *différance*, however, is that "it becomes necessary to stabilise precisely because stability is not natural" (ibid). Stability is not natural because the essential emptiness of signs is productive *ad infinitum*. The second reason why this destruction is not catastrophic is that "it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilise" (ibid), and, thus, to re-create and begin again.

## Conclusions

This article advanced three arguments. First, understanding Derrida's *différance* and the qualification 'quasi-transcendental' requires a structural reading of these concepts as issuing from a reduction of phenomenology: a reduction which entails both conservation and transformation of this tradition. Second, conserving Husserl's reduction of empiricism, including historicism, is factually and structurally necessary for the disclosure of *différance* for two reasons: it allows Derrida to step into the history of the tradition of metaphysics in order to undertake an internal and *historical* criticism, *and* it also allows him to avoid the flaws of empiricism and relativism. This necessary conservation helps differentiate Derrida's philosophy from historicisms of various denominations. Third, the irreducibility of writing at the core of the transcendental experience of *phōnē* reduces the entire edifice of phenomenology, including its foundational method, as well as the metaphysical concept of the sign. I argue that *différance* is quasi-transcendental in the sense of making consciousness (and its accompanying concepts) possible as 'representation of representation' which, as such, can never appear.

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Rebeka Perez Leon

## Rekonstrukcija „*différance*" kao *istorije* kroz Deridinu redukciju Huserlove fenomenologije

**Apstrakt**

U članku se tvrde tri stvari. Prvo, razumevanje Deridinog koncepta „*différance*" i 'kvazi-transcendentalna' kvalifikacija zahteva da se rekonstituiše put koji vodi do Deridine *istorijske* metodološke sheme. Drugo, metodološki je i historijski nužno da se pođe putem reaktivacije Huserlove kritike i redukcije svakog empirizma, uključujući istoricizam. Reaktivacija omogućuje fenomenologiji strukturalnu ulogu u Deridinoj filozofiji i dovodi u pitanje istoricističko čitanje Deride. Treće, nesvodivost pisanja je u srcu krajnjeg fenomenološkog transcendentalnog iskustva *phōnē* redukuje metafizičku tradiciju, razlikujući njene nesuštinske elemente – prisustvo u svim svojim formama kao apsolutni početak i kraj svakog smisla – od onih suštinskih – pisanje kao suštinska proizvodnja značenja u nedogled, bez obzira na istinu i objektivnost. Ova nesvodivost je kvazi-transcendentalna jer čini fenomenološku strukturu mogućom samo kao simboličku reprezentaciju koja ne predstavlja ništa, ali nemoguću kao ispunjenje namera subjekta kroz intuiciju

Ključne reči: *différance*, istorija, istorijska fenomenologija, kvazitranscendentalno, redukcija, Huserl