

# Derrida's Inscription of Failure as a Condition of Possibility for Phenomenology

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## Abstract:

*Truth is neither presence nor absence, Jew or Greek, being or non-being, self or other but the difference and differance between these two extremes, Derrida emphasizes the importance of iterability or repetition of both extremes as essentially the same, truth is thus quasi-transcendental or the interval between transcendental and empirical which enables both. The concept is marked by its signature, or its breaking away from the origin, to signify a different kind of writing in order to communicate – which is the logic of the graft, intervening in order to signify anew, and renovate meaning and experience, to mark a double writing, and effect a displacement of the traditional hierarchy of meaning and a reversal.*

**Keywords:** Transcendental, Empirical, Metaphysics, Philosophy, Deconstruction

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A common misconception of Derrida is that he continues the legacy of Nietzsche and Heidegger by negating the positive or the transcendental in favour of the negative or empirical, as Stanley Rosen argues in *Hermeneutics as Politics*. Rosen argues that Derrida's differance is a nihilistic embrace of nothingness over the transcendental and an inversion of Hegel, as well as that contrary to Derrida, speech is superior to writing because of the politics encoded in the hierarchy: while one can adjust conversation according to the nature of the interlocutor, in the way that the equity of the judge adjusts the written law to the individual case, writing says the same thing to everyone. Rosen misses Derrida's point entirely, which is to bring about democracy through his emphasis that speech is a form of writing and writing is hence prior to speech.

Rosen also misses Derrida's point on metaphysical conditioning by accusing him of being a nihilist and empiricist, Derrida rather locates the conditions of possibility of metaphysics as that which is neither transcendental nor empirical, but the difference between them, or differance. Out of differance arises the differentiating

trace that distinguishes transcendental and empirical.

This paper argues, contrary to Rosen, that Derrida is not an empiricist, or nihilist, but posits the meta-conditions that enable metaphysical perpetuation and production- which are differance and iterability. The transcendental is nothing outside its iteration as the empirical, and hence arises not from transcendental as condition of possibility, but through the movement of repetition, or the trace.

The trace retrospectively distinguishes transcendental and empirical. Derrida's deconstruction is thus a meta-phenomenology rather than a negation or inversion of phenomenology as critics like Rosen argue.

Another critic who holds a view that Derrida continues Heidegger's legacy is Paul Manihotttil, in *Difference at the Origin- Derrida's Critique of Heidegger's Philosophy of the Work of Art*. Manihotttil argues that deconstruction radicalizes the task of destruction inaugurated by Heidegger. I would like to demonstrate that Derrida's work does not represent an extension of Heidegger's as I do not

believe, as Manihotttil argues, that Derrida is critical of Western metaphysics or that the aim of Derrida's deconstruction is to undo the transcendental absolute of Western metaphysics.

Derrida argues that the absolute is constituted by iterability and the trace, but does not in any way negate or invert the absolute, only investigating the conditions of possibility for its production. Manihotttil further argues that Derrida reduces every concept to the play of the text. I contest Manihotttil's view that Derrida's work negates presence and reduces everything to textuality.

Rather, Derrida investigates the conditions of possibility for the perpetuation of presence and logocentrism, his arguments about textuality are not a reduction to the empirical but an argument about the fundamental mediation of meaning. The transcendental has to be iterated as the empirical and repeated in the empirical through the movement of difference and the trace rather than existing without a medium or in a vacuum as Husserl's Cartesian reduction would have it.

The transcendental exists only in and through iterability. This is what Derrida means by the statement, "There is nothing outside the text", (Derrida 1976:158) that truth or the absolute is irrevocably mediated, rather than existing without a medium, through iterability and repetition with a difference.

In *Structure, Sign and Play* Derrida describes history as "a detour between two presences- between structure, sign and play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play." (Derrida 1978:292)

Derrida argues that there is no "question of choosing between the two, but to conceive of the common ground, difference of irreducible difference" (Derrida, 1978:292) the monstrous birth of the quasi-transcendental. The quasi-transcendental conceives of difference, or

the interval between transcendental and empirical, as the condition of possibility and common ground for both transcendental and empirical idealism.

This passage from *Writing and Difference* was written while Derrida had been working on his subsequent manuscript *Speech and Phenomena*, and in it we see the genesis of Derrida's thoughts on metaphysics. It is no longer a question of simply choosing between transcendental idealism or a metaphysics of presence and radical empiricism with Nietzsche and Heidegger, because each thought of either requires the opposing term as its relational other and defining axis.

Idealism means nothing when defined in isolation from the empirical, just as empiricism is an empty term without its relation to the transcendental. In Husserl for instance, his maintenance of the transcendental subject depends on his exclusion of the indicative, just as Heidegger requires the exclusion of the ideal from his situated Being in order to maintain a pure Being untainted by Christian spirituality.

Transcendental is not conceivable without the empirical and empirical is not

conceivable without the transcendental, they are only related dynamically through iterability and repetition with a difference. Truth is then not localizable to transcendental or empirical, but situated in between as difference and the quasi-transcendental. Deconstruction thus proceeds by revealing the aporia that thought cannot do without its ghost or unthought and then proceeds towards transgressing the limit toward thinking the unthought of discourse and bringing it to light.

Deconstruction is thus justice as it reveals the dynamic interdependency between discourse and its shadow or ghost. It proceeds to demonstrate that thought cannot do without its ghost or unthought. Deconstruction is the thinking of simultaneous identity and difference, identity in non-identity as a priori difference is necessary for thinking both terms which thus share the condition of being determined by this prior difference, hence difference translates into sameness.

Deconstruction shows that the possibility of a distinction is simultaneously its impossibility as that which makes the distinction impossible, for instance what allows expression to

exclude indication, is precisely the defining moment that upholds the distinction.

It is necessary to exclude indication in order to maintain the transcendental subject, just as it is necessary for Heidegger to exclude Christian spirituality from his anthropological Being in order to maintain its worldliness and separation from the transcendental. Each moment of exclusion is necessary for the maintenance of the defining term as it means something only in relation to its other or unthought. Deconstruction is thus the thinking of the simultaneous similarity and difference, identity in non-identity of thought and its unthought.

Deconstruction is the thought of the simultaneous one and its other, or simultaneous positive and negative, because the other or negative is the relational assumption that founds the possibility of thinking the one or positive. Deconstruction is thus the simultaneous thought of both one and other or both positive and negative, because these exist only in relation to each other, through iterability and differance.

The trap that many contemporary commentators fall into is assuming that Derrida privileges the empirical and continues the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger, as Martin Hagglund assumes in his book *Radical Atheism*. Hagglund describes Derrida as a materialist who dethrones the sacred in his texts. Likewise Michael Marder, in *The Event of the Thing* argues that deconstruction is a realism that detaches the object from ideal origins in a post-phenomenological turn, thus returning to the thing as fundamentally empirical.

My interpretation diverges from such interpretations of Derrida because I hold that they have failed to grasp the aporia of Derrida's thought: you cannot think the transcendental without the empirical and vice versa, the transcendental and empirical are paradoxically similar and different, identical and non-identical. Derrida is not to be mistaken as an empiricist, rather he is a thinker of paradox, aporia, and the very conditions that make thought possible such as differance and iterability.

Transcendental and empirical do not exist outside the structure of repetition as each term requires the other for the

distinction to be upheld and only can be defined in relation to the other term as each term, is, on its own, an empty term that requires the exclusion of the other to be thought and conceptualised.

The transcendental has to be excluded from the empirical to be defined, just as the empirical has to be excluded from the transcendental to be defined. His idealism can only stand with the expulsion and exclusion of indication from his philosophy, just as radical empiricists such as Heidegger, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur and Blanchot require the transcendental to be excluded from their philosophies to define them, accounting for the transcendental on empirical grounds.

This act of exclusion is thus necessary, yet mistaken about the fundamental structure of metaphysics because transcendental and empirical only exist in relation to each other through iterability and differance. As Derrida demonstrates, philosophy since Plato has assumed the ontological structure and vocabulary of metaphysics, whether it has affirmed it as philosophy or deviated from it as non-philosophy.

Transcendental and empirical are thus terms that are inscribed in language, whether we associate or disassociate ourselves from these terms, these metaphysical terms haunt the structure and vocabulary of our philosophy. True philosophy would, thus, as Derrida demonstrates, come to terms with the necessity of both terms to thinking each other and acknowledge the quasi-transcendental, the between, the neither transcendental nor empirical, as the paradoxical space between that determines the thinking of both, or differance.

I have located the problematic of an aporia that lies at the centre of philosophy. Phenomenology has divided itself itself into transcendental idealism or empirical idealism and non-philosophy. In both these incarnations of phenomenology, Husserl's transcendental idealism and the radical empiricism in the philosophies of Heidegger, Levinas, Ricoeur, Blanchot and Merleau-Ponty, lies a form of theoretical essentialism and blindness to the meta-condition that structures phenomenology.

It is differance, the space or interval between the transcendental and empirical which conditions and produces both the transcendental and empirical

through the retrospective movement of the trace. Derrida's contribution to phenomenology, as I will argue in this paper, is his discovery of the quasi-transcendental, or the interval between the transcendental and empirical which determines phenomenology.

It does this through the productive and differentiating movement of the trace. As transcendental-empirical difference is an illusion, then truth would be neither transcendental nor empirical. Rather the difference or difference between transcendental and empirical would be its meta-condition and that which enables the thinking of its structurality.

Truth is neither presence nor absence, Jew or Greek, being or non-being, self or other but the difference and difference between these two extremes, Derrida emphasizes the importance of iterability or repetition of both extremes as essentially the same, truth is thus quasi-transcendental or the interval between transcendental and empirical which enables both. The concept is marked by its signature, or its breaking away from the origin, to signify a different kind of writing in order to communicate – which is the logic of the graft, intervening in order to signify anew, and renovate meaning and

experience, to mark a double writing, and effect a displacement of the traditional hierarchy of meaning and a reversal.

Deconstruction examines these principles of displacement and reversal, in order to bring about democracy, and emphasize writing as a primary form of communication. Writing brings about a force of signification that exceeds its origin, so there is always a surplus and excess of meaning, which can never be reduced to a univocal signified.

In doing so deconstruction turns philosophy towards infinite possibility rather than a hierarchy, as meaning always exceeds its origin. Origin itself is an illusion and supplemented by the function and logic of the trace, which displaces it in order to communicate. Derrida inscribes in phenomenology it a measure of fallibility through his demonstrations that thought is always contaminated by its unthought, the ideal is always contaminated by contingency and undecidability.

Derrida's arguments are modes of interrogation in which he questions the basis of presence, fully given to itself, uncontaminated by absence, contingency, the empirical, the Other, and as such

inscribes the necessity of incarnation and a necessity for the mark to fail as presence as it has to differ from itself materially in order to be realized.

Derrida thus inscribes failure in phenomenology, its necessity for the mark to die and survive itself as the trace to live on in the material world, and thus rescues phenomenology by demonstrating that its success as an enterprise depends on including what it had excluded- which is transcendental-empirical difference.

This paper argues that Derrida democratizes phenomenology in demonstrating that transcendental and empirical difference is an illusion. By demonstrating that transcendental empirical difference is an illusion, Derrida shows that the struggle over claims for truth or the primacy of the transcendental or empirical have been sustained over illusory hierarchies and that this presents a false dichotomy and conflict. Phenomenology is not hierarchy but exchangeability, and the implication of transcendental-empirical difference being

an illusion is that truth is not localizable to either transcendental or empirical, but translates as paradox, aporia and the quasi-transcendental. The transcendental and empirical are the same and the transcendental is nothing outside the empirical, just as the empirical is the trace of the transcendental through iterability. Phenomenology is rather determined by aporia- the third space of the quasi-transcendental which produces both transcendental and empirical through the distinguishing movement of the trace. Aporia, the third space, the quasi-transcendental and difference as the interval between the transcendental and empirical that determines both are shown to be the meta-conditions that govern metaphysics. This paper thus posits the space of the third and between, namely the quasi-transcendental, as the root condition that governs metaphysics and allows it to function. Where phenomenology has historically defined truth as either



transcendental or empirical, this paper will proceed to demonstrate that truth is rather quasi-transcendental, neither transcendental nor empirical but a space between that enables the thinking of both. Against current scholarship that defines the quasi-transcendental as immanence and contamination, I will argue that the quasi-transcendental is a relation of paradox. The quasi-transcendental relates the transcendental and empirical in simultaneous identity and difference, identity in non-identity, sameness in difference. Paradoxically, distinctions translate into non-distinctions because the difference between the transcendental and empirical translates as a nothingness, an a priori difference which is not a difference. Death thus lies at the heart of phenomenology and constitutes it as a priori difference, difference, distinguishes and separates nothing. Derrida reconfigures phenomenology through his discovery of the quasi-transcendental, the

space of the third, paradox, aporia and the between, that which is neither transcendental nor empirical, as the conditionality of thinking both transcendental and empirical. This quasi-transcendental determines metaphysics by being prior to transcendental and empirical and conditions its production and functioning. Derrida thus democratizes philosophy in demonstrating that its distinctions, its privilege of transcendental or empirical and its divide into materialism and idealism is based on illusion and myth of origin. Phenomenology is thus determined by its other and its unthought, true phenomenology acknowledges that which has escaped its structure in transcendental and empirical determination, or the third space, between, aporia and interval of the quasi-transcendental, as the true condition that governs, produces, and upholds metaphysics. Derrida thus inscribes phenomenology in a more powerful form

by bringing it to terms with its condition of possibility as the quasi-transcendental. I define the democratization of phenomenology as a site of inclusion, expanding phenomenology's horizons to include the other and unthought of phenomenology as its condition of possibility. As texts such as *Monolingualism of the Other* demonstrate, there is no pure language that is uncontaminated by the Other as all language is acquisition and assimilation. Also, *The Politics of Friendship* shows that the Other has to precede me before friendship is possible, just as Narcissus relates to Echo only by seeing the Other in himself. Along similar trajectories, phenomenology's Other or unthought is shown to be the basis for the One or thought. What this paper thus proceeds to show is the unthought that forms the basis for thought, thereby expanding phenomenology beyond its territorial concerns of an either/or kind of truth

because phenomenology is always determined by difference, the neither/nor, and the ghost of the text that returns to haunt it. At the same time, this paper argues that Derrida's move to save phenomenology inscribes in it a measure of fallibility through his demonstrations that thought is always contaminated by its unthought, the ideal is always contaminated by contingency and undecidability, Derrida's arguments are not absolute treatises to be taken at face value but a mode of interrogation in which he questions the basis of presence, fully given to itself, uncontaminated by absence, contingency, the empirical, the Other, and as such inscribes the necessity of incarnation and a necessity for the mark to fail as presence has to differ from itself materially in order to be realized. In order to succeed thus, phenomenology has to fail as it has to survive itself as the trace. Derrida thus democratizes phenomenology in showing its success depends upon its

incarnation and death to self presence in order to realize itself through living on after its death as the trace. In *Positions*, Derrida defines history as the history of the metaphysical concept, which does not exist outside of a system of differences and play. Derrida's work is thus a reworking of teleological history into histories, showing that transcendental and empirical do not exist outside relationality to each other as

supplements and traces. Derrida demonstrates that phenomenology has proceeded through the exclusion of metaphor, or suppressing the metaphoricity of texts by privileging an either/or side of the binary, where phenomenology is to be viewed as constituted by metaphor, dynamically relating both transcendental and empirical rather than privileging either side.

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