

# Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida on The Absolute

**Dr Chung Chin-Yi**

Research scholar, National University of Singapore

[Enigma719@hotmail.com](mailto:Enigma719@hotmail.com)

*Abstract: Derrida shows that the relation between the eidetic reduction and the absolute origin is one of repetition – the reduction is the iteration of the noema. It re-awakens the dependence of sense with respect to the institutive and creative act of the absolute origin which, far from being submerged and lost, is re-activated through the reduction through repetition with a difference in the present. This de-sediments the concealed origin of the past and re-activates it in the present and future. The Absolute origin of the past which was instituted creatively “for the first time” by the first geometers is thus re-activated through the reduction through the iteration of the noema, or the repetition of the Absolute with a difference in the present. This origin is produced only retrospectively through the act of repetition, signalling to a presence that never existed. Repetition produces the subsequent division into transcendental and empirical retrospectively signalling to a presence that must have existed but was never there through the differentiating movement of the trace.*

*Keywords: Benjamin, Derrida, Absolute, Difference, Concept*

In Benjamin’s *Abilities*, Weber draws a parallel between Benjamin’s philosophy and

Derridean deconstruction in noting the affinity between “translatability” and

“iterability”. Essentially, Derrida argues that the structure of the mark is its repeatability, its ability to differ from itself a priori, and Weber transposes this concept of the ability of the concept to be repeated to Benjamin’s work in noting that the Absolute has to be translated to be instantiated. Weber notes that the concept is defined by its “ability” to be translated and iterated, the concept is a certain power or potential to be repeated with a difference as the material, as Aristotle noted with his *dynamis / energeia* distinction or the difference between potentiality and actuality as a power to be translated and repeated with a difference, or iterability.

In this illuminating re-reading of Benjamin, Weber applies Derrida’s meta-

concept of iterability, or the ability of a concept to be repeated, to bear on Benjamin's texts. Accordingly, Weber traces the conditions of possibility for Benjamin's Absolute to its translatability, as Benjamin has read the Absolute in "The task of the translator" and "The Work of Art in Mechanical Reproduction" as that which has to be translated and reproduced, or repeated. Weber draws an analogy between this repeatability of the Absolute with the actualization of the virtual in Deleuze. The hallmark of a concept, as it appears to Weber for Benjamin, Deleuze and Derrida, is thus its translatability and repeatability, or iterability. This again applies to Weber's reading of epic theatre in Benjamin as a citability. What Weber successfully performs in his readings of Benjamin, Deleuze and Derrida is a tracing of the conditions of possibility that has informed all their readings of the Absolute to iterability or repeatability. Weber thus successfully traces the meta-concept that has sustained their readings of the Absolute in a thoroughly engaging and convincing manner.

According to Weber's Derridean rereading of Benjamin, the structure that informs their interpretation of the concept is a certain structural necessity for citability and repeatability or iterability is the a priori condition of a concept- its necessity to actualize itself. This is Deleuze's translation from virtual to actual and Benjamin's translation of the transcendental Absolute in his work, which many have interpreted as a Kantian a priori form, into empirical conditions as the transcendental is nothing outside the empirical, the virtual is nothing

outside the actual, it is the nothing that separates transcendental and empirical which enables its paradoxical differentiation. On Weber's interpretation, this a priori difference as a nothing which separates the transcendental and empirical, or iterability, is precisely what enables the actualization of the concept. The hallmark of a concept is its ability to be repeated and actualized.

Weber describes, in deconstructive fashion, this actualization of the concept as a death of the concept and a relation to its afterlife, in other words, the concept has to go through a certain annihilation or death as an idea and survive itself afterwards in the material world in order to be actualized. In Derridean readings the structure of this repetition as death and survival is the production of the trace. The very act of hearing-oneself-speak presumes a need for signs, and thus solitary mental life needs indicative signs to communicate to oneself. Thus absence and the empirical have invaded solitary mental life, which cannot be reduced to pure expressive signs or ideality. At the heart of life is death. Death and non-presence is the condition of possibility for life. Death constitutes life, it is the impossible possibility that enables life.

The hallmark for the Absolute that Weber thus draws as an affinity between Benjamin's philosophy of the Absolute and Derrida's deconstruction is thus the structure of the concept as repeatability, iterability, the ability to be repeated, and a priori difference. The concept survives its death to the ideal world to live on in the material world as that which has been translated as

concepts are irrevocably mediated, the transcendental is nothing outside the empirical, form has to actualize itself as content. Weber thus argues for the pertinence of deconstruction to an interpretation of Benjamin as both believe in the translatability of the Absolute as repetition with a difference, and a priori difference.

*Translation is a mode. To comprehend it as a mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law of its translation: its translatability.<sup>1</sup>*

Translation thus means recapturing the essence of the original through detecting a mode of language through which it exists- its translatability or repeatability. Weber's detection of the similarity between translatability or repeatability is basically the structure of a concept's need to be repeated with a difference in order to be instantiated.

*For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. Even in times of narrowly prejudiced thought there was an inkling that life was not limited to organic corporeality. But it cannot be a matter of extending its dominion under the feeble scepter of the soul as Fechner tried to do, or conversely of basing its definition on the*

*even less conclusive factors of animality, such as sensation which characterize life only occasionally. The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life.<sup>2</sup>*

The concept thus survives its death in the ideal world to live on in the material world as a form of exemplarity, the transcendental is nothing outside the empirical and ideal concepts have to be mediated as the empirical in order to come to life. The concept of life that determines a concept is thus its translatability, concepts have to survive their repetition of the ideal in the material and be instantiated through difference, the nothing which separates the transcendental and empirical to come into being.

### **Derrida's reading of the Absolute**

In Derrida's reading, the Absolute is constituted by repetition and representation and not presentation, which has never existed in the first place. The absolute has to be re-activated through time and history by the iteration of the noema and the repetition of presence in absence, being in non-being. This bifurcates the a priori. This absolute is always deferred and delayed, spatially and temporally, communicated to us through the passage of difference. The Absolute is communicated by its signature or trace. For instance Derrida states in *Introduction to Origin of Geometry* that:

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1967. p.70.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

Here, on the contrary, the *here and now* of the “first time” is institutive and creative. Is this experience, unique of its kind, not a singular fact – one for which we should not be able to substitute another fact as an example in order to decipher its essence?

Is this to say that this inseparability of fact and sense in the oneness of an instituting act precludes access for phenomenology to all history and to the pure *eidos* of a forever submerged origin?

Not at all. The indissociability itself has a rigorously determinable phenomenological sense. The imaginary variation of static phenomenology simply supposed a type of reduction whose style will have to be renewed in a historical phenomenology. The eidetic aspect of this reduction was the iteration of a noema: since the *eidos* is constituted and objective, the series of acts which intended it could not but indefinitely restore the ideal identity of sense which was not obscured by any historical opacity, and it would only be a question of clarifying, isolating, and determining its evidence, invariance, and objective independence. The historical reduction, which also operated by variation, will be reactivating and noetic. Instead of repeating the constituted sense of an ideal object, one will have to reawaken the dependence of sense with respect to an inaugural and

institutive act concealed under secondary passivities and infinite sedimentations – a primordial act which created the object whose *eidos* is determined by the iterative reduction. Here again we are going to see that there is no simple response to the question of the priority of one reduction over another.<sup>3</sup>

Derrida shows that the relation between the eidetic reduction and the absolute origin is one of repetition – the reduction is the iteration of the noema. It re-awakens the dependence of sense with respect to the institutive and creative act of the absolute origin which, far from being submerged and lost, is re-activated through the reduction through repetition with a difference in the present. This de-sediments the concealed origin of the past and re-activates it in the present and future. The Absolute origin of the past which was instituted creatively “for the first time” by the first geometers is thus re-activated through the reduction through the iteration of the noema, or the repetition of the Absolute with a difference in the present. This origin is produced only retrospectively through the act of repetition, signalling to a presence that never existed. Repetition produces the subsequent division into transcendental and empirical retrospectively signalling to a presence that must have existed but was never there through the differentiating movement of the

---

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry': An Introduction*. John P. Leavy, Jr., tr. New York; Hassocks: Harvester Press; Hays, 1978. p. 47-48

trace. The Absolute, or its myth, is thus constituted by this re-activating iteration of the noema, or repetition with a difference in the present and future through the reduction. This signature of the Absolute dislodges it from the origin, and institutes a new writing and a dissemination of plurivocal meaning. Further Derrida states that:

The impossibility of resting in the simple maintenance (nowness) of a Living Present, the sole and absolutely absolute origin of the De Facto and the De Jure, of Being and Sense, but always other in its self-identity: the inability to live enclosed in the innocent undividedness (indivision) of the primordial Absolute, because the Absolute is present only in being *deferred-delayed (differant)* without respite, this impotence and this impossibility are given in a primordial and pure consciousness of Difference. Such a consciousness, with its strange style of unity, must be restored to its own light. Without such a consciousness, without its own proper dehiscence, nothing would appear.

The primordial Difference of the absolute Origin, which can and indefinitely must both retain and announce its pure concrete form with a priori security, i.e. the beyond or the this-side which gives sense to all empirical genius and factual profusion, that is perhaps what has always been said under the concept of “transcendental” through the enigmatic history of its

displacements. Difference would be transcendental. The pure and interminable disquietude of thought striving to ‘reduce’ Difference by going beyond factual infinity toward the disquietude would be transcendental. And Thought’s pure certainty would be transcendental, since it can look forward to the already announced Telos only by advancing (or being in advance of) the Origin that indefinitely reserves itself. Such a certainty never had to learn that Thought would always be to come.

The strange procession of a “Ruckfrage” is the movement sketched in *The Origin of Geometry*, whereby this piece of writing also holds, as Husserl says, an “exemplary significance.”<sup>4</sup>

Derrida discusses the conditions of possibility of the Absolute – it is always relayed spatially and temporally through the passage of difference, deferred and delayed in order to be communicated. As Derrida puts it earlier, the Absolute is passage – the Absolute is re-activated through the iteration of the noema, of what Derrida calls the movement and the procession of the “Ruckfrage.” It is the possibility of the iteration of the noema, and the re-activation of the Absolute origin that ensures its transmission through time and history from past to future, as Derrida puts it “Thought would always be to come”. The Absolute is thus never present to itself or undivided in the Living Present, it is always delay. Hence

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 153.



the Living Present is always co-existent with the past and the future, or the not-now. Presence is thus aligned with non-presence in the forms of past and future in order to be perpetuated. The Absolute is constituted through its repetition and deferral through space and time in order to be communicated. As Derrida puts it, pure thought is always delay. The Absolute origin, or its myth, thus has to be re-activated through its iteration and conveyed through the passage of difference in order to perpetuate itself through space and time. Repetition produces the Absolute origin retrospectively through division into the transcendental and empirical signalling to a presence which was never there. The Absolute, or the transcendental, is thus really difference, or delay and deferral in its passage through time and history to be perpetuated from past to future. The Absolute always differs from itself in its repetition with a difference or difference, without this difference or deferral through space and time, nothing would appear to consciousness. The Absolute only exists as its signature, or difference from origin.

### Thing and Space

Husserl sets down the conditions of possibility of perception in *Thing and Space* by formulating these in terms of pre-empirical constitutive functions of space and time. Objects are constituted and given in terms of these ideal structures which are apprehended and apperceived, which the mind imposes and processes manifold perceptions, or pure empirical datum, to form continuous unities. This sets down the

ideal as the condition of possibility for the empirical, as Husserl argues, objects are intended, and intentionality constitutes the empirical in terms of the ideal. The problem with such a formulation is that it sets a rigid dichotomy and sets apart the ideal and the empirical, resulting in an aporia of non-correlation and distinctness between the transcendental and the empirical. The phenomenological reduction which Husserl repeatedly institutes in order to arrive at the conditions of knowledge, namely space and time, also results in an aporia by nullifying the phenomenon of difference and iterability. Difference and iterability, according to Derrida, translate as the condition of possibility of the ideal.

As discussed earlier, iterability becomes a more reasonable account of the way in which metaphysics functions and more consistent with the doctrine of intentionality than the reduction or the transcendental epoche. Difference constitutes ideality through repetition, or iterability, and ideality is only made possible by its iterability or repeatability. Intentionality implies that the ideal and empirical are mutually implicated and the reduction that is performed in order to arrive at pre-empirical forms of space and time thus negates the phenomenon of iterability which translates into the condition of possibility of the ideal.

Husserl further distinguishes real and reell, or transcendent and immanent perception. Husserl posits immanent perception as absolute and the condition of possibility of transcendent perception. This leads to a logocentrism which forgets its origin as difference. Also as discussed

earlier, it is counter-intuitive that immanent perception is the sole constitutor of transcendent perception rather than the trace. The trace is the a priori difference which is the very condition of possibility for transcendental genesis. Perception, as argued by Derrida, finds its condition of possibility in the trace, or difference, and the repetition of the transcendental in the empirical. Immanent perception iterates transcendent perception and hence would be its mediation, rather than solely determined by transcendent and pre-empirical intuition. The transcendental is produced as separate and distinct from the empirical only through the illusory movement of difference. It is iterability that produces the illusion of the transcendental and empirical as separate through the distinguishing movement of the trace, or the production of its difference from the original mark that sustains metaphysics.

The reduction repeatedly performed by Husserl to arrive at the pure conditions of knowledge, the immanent or pre-empirical that unites discrete phenomena, manifold perception, or dead matter into continuous unities of objects. This lands phenomenology in an aporia by nullifying the movement of difference and iterability which are the true conditions of possibility for ideality. The reduction paradoxically is a repetition and iteration of the noema rather than the isolation of the transcendental through negating the empirical. The reduction can only be performed through this repetition or iteration of the noema, and thus to define transcendental without empirical lands phenomenology in an aporia. The transcendental is only produced as separate from the empirical as an illusion, through

the retrospective movement of the trace. Hence, the phenomenological reduction in effect nullifies phenomenology's conditions of possibility by negating the movement of iterability. This aporia becomes resolved by Derrida's account of the quasi-transcendental, which posits the relation of iterability or repetition with a difference which produces the illusion that transcendental and empirical are distinct when they are the same.

As Derrida has argued in *Of Grammatology*, every signified is already in the position of signifier, and the signified only exists through its mediation as the signifier to come into being, Husserl's rigid distinction between transcendent and immanent perception will thus be shown to be in this sense, problematic. This problematization however will not be taken for granted. It will be asked if this problematization is necessary to arrive at the conditions of possibility for knowledge and if the account of the transcendental in phenomenology or the quasi-transcendental in post-phenomenology provides a more convincing account of a theory of knowledge. It will be asked if Derrida's positing of the quasi-transcendental saves phenomenology by positing the dynamic relation between them as difference and repetition, as the ideal has to differ from itself as the original mark through repetition with a difference to be instantiated. This enables phenomenology to move from static to genetic by naming the conditions of possibility for transcendental genesis. These are difference and the trace. The transcendental is only formed retrospectively through repetition, as its iteration to be communicated through space

and time, which ensures its transmission through history. The transcendental, or its myth, is always deferred and delayed through its communication to us with the passage of difference, this ensures that thought will always be 'to come' as the transcendental becomes re-activated from its absolute origin in the past through its repetitions in the present and future.

### Idea of Phenomenology

*The Idea of Phenomenology* marks Husserl's first turn towards transcendental idealism. It is here that Husserl introduces his eidetic reduction to arrive at the absolute self-given-ness of the immanent perception. This again, privileges presence and intuition at the expense of difference and the empirical. Husserl institutes the phenomenological reduction in order to arrive at the transcendental ego or absolute given-ness of immanent perception. Through this act of reduction Husserl hopes to suspend the natural and the empirical which he believes to be contingent and relative to absolute consciousness in immanent perception and which can be isolated through the transcendental reduction. As argued earlier, this move leads to logocentrism as it privileges intuition and presence.

### Ideas I

Husserl sets out his transcendental project of phenomenology in *Ideas I*. By distinguishing between fact and essence, the real and the unreal, noesis and noema, transcendent and immanent, and raising the

essential to absolute. For instance he argues that immanent perception is absolute and transcendent perception is merely contingent and relative. Husserl consolidates his logocentrism in privileging presence. Husserl also defines his phenomenological reduction in detail here, arguing that the reduction must be performed in order to arrive at the noematic constitution of knowledge. It is a noematization of the real in order to arrive at the pure conditions of knowledge as the unreal essence that determines the real. As argued in the previous paragraph, this principle is dubitable when juxtaposed with the principle of iterability. Reduction fundamentally forgets the principle of repetition that enables metaphysics to function, resulting in a metaphysics that privileges presence. This excludes difference and becomes phenomenalist and solipsistic. Husserl's denigration of the empirical, or the natural world view taken by the sciences, forgets that the real embodies the ideal as its condition of possibility. This results in a metaphysics that excludes difference. It will be argued in this thesis that iterability must be taken into account when Husserl defines constitution and rather than conveniently forget the origins of the ideal that comes from the supplement or the trace which is the difference between presence and absence that enables metaphysics to function. One should acknowledge the economy of the transcendental and the empirical, or the quasi-transcendental. The quasi-transcendental grounds metaphysics, constitutes it, as it were, and allows it to function. The supplement or the quasi-transcendental is what enables the



transcendental to come into being. There is no transcendental outside and without the empirical. Hence, metaphysics must acknowledge what it had repressed in order for a more holistic and just reading of metaphysics to occur. There is no metaphysics without iterability. Hence a logocentrism like Husserl's which only privileges presence and negates the movement of iterability by his act of phenomenological reduction can only result in a metaphysics that suppresses difference as its condition of possibility. No distinction between expression and indication would be able to take place without the quasi-transcendental, or transcendental-empirical difference. Hence the transcendental requires the empirical in order to be distinguished from it to perform Husserl's act of phenomenological reduction and exclusion, thus metaphysics cannot function without the quasi-transcendental, the neither transcendental nor empirical, which upholds the possibility of the distinction and the impossibility of their separation.

### Cartesian Meditations

In this text Husserl sets out Descartes' notion of reflection as the ideal for his philosophy. The Cartesian ideal is the transcendental ego which is isolated in the act of reflection, and Husserl further consolidates this isolation of the transcendental ego through his act of phenomenological reduction. This leads to solipsism and a privileging presence and intuition in the form of the transcendental ego which exists as a phantom without embodiment. Again, we find ourselves trapped in phenomenalism and solipsism. This awkwardly posits the transcendental

without the empirical. As stated in the paragraphs above, this act of reduction cannot take place without landing metaphysics in an aporia. How does the transcendental ego exist without the empirical ego? This act of reduction, as stated above, negates the movement of iterability and difference. The attempts to arrive at apodictic certainty result in a privileging presence and intuition without the empirical. The very notion of the apodictic is itself a privileging of intuition as absolute. As we have seen above, this leads to problems: there is no transcendental ego without the empirical ego. They are the same, as the transcendental ego exists only in and through the empirical ego. The Cartesian ghost left without a machine is thus ultimately, a prisonhouse of metaphysical idealism that finds itself in an absurd state of unembodiment, and as we have seen with the principle of iterability, this phantom transcendental ego simply does not exist without the empirical ego which allows it to come into being.

### Works cited:

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1967

Derrida, Jacques. *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry': An Introduction*. John P. Leavey, Jr., tr. New York; Hassocks: Harvester Press; Hays,

Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations*. Trans, D. Cairns. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1967.



---*Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological*

*Philosophy, First Book.* Trans. F. Kersten. Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1983.

--- *Shorter Works.* Ed. Peter McCormick and Frederick A. Elliston. University of

Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 1981.

---*The Idea of Phenomenology.* Trans. Lee Hardy. *Collected Works*, vol.8.

Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999.

--- *Thing and Space: Lectures of 1907,* trans R. Rojcewicz. *Collected Works.vol.7.*

Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997.

Weber, Samuel. *Benjamin's Abilities.* Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press.

2008.