

DERRIDA AND HUSSERL ON TIME

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Abstract. In this essay I take issue with Derrida's interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology of internal time-consciousness in *Speech and Phenomena*. Derrida's critique of Husserl's phenomenology of time also forms the basis for what Derrida regards to be an undermining of phenomenological philosophy itself. After first disagreeing with Derrida's interpretation of Husserl's understanding of time I proceed to object to his „undermining” of phenomenology. I attempt to illustrate that his critique of phenomenology is unconvincing.

I.

Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena* is primarily a critique of Husserl's theory of signs as this is elaborated in *Logical Investigations*; at least this is what *SP* ostensibly claims to be.¹ Derrida suggests that essential distinctions are made in this early text of Husserl's that determine, though perhaps in a concealed manner, much of his later philosophical work (Derrida 1973, pp. 3-5). However, *SP* claims to be much more than this; we are given to think, by the author, that a refutation, or at least a problematisation of the possibility of phenomenology is demonstrated. This is obviously no small claim – a refutation of arguably the most influential European philosophy of the twentieth century. As Natalie Alexander points out, Derrida's whole demonstration hinges on the fifth chapter of *SP*, which supposedly focuses on Husserl's phenomenology of internal time-consciousness (Alexander 1995, p. 124). It is with this chapter that we shall primarily concern ourselves.

¹ I will refer to Jacques Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena* as *SP*.

Derrida claims, in *SP*, to be giving a critique of phenomenology's central concepts, thus rendering them problematic; however, anyone familiar with phenomenological thought knows that phenomenology is not so much a system or body of concepts as a particular way of doing philosophy. Phenomenology is essentially a method that claims to ground its insights in the „things themselves”. To problematise phenomenology is to problematise a method, a way of thinking, which distances itself from „ungrounded speculations”.

Any critique of a thinker (in this case Husserl) involves a presentation of the views of the thinker in question. Critique and refutation of another's thoughts always requires that one first present the other's thoughts in order to then demonstrate their failings or falsities. When it comes to interpreting philosophical texts we all know that there is much room for interpretation; it would be hard to state that there is ever a definitive interpretation of any text; after all, this interpretation would itself be open to differences in interpretations etc. Transparency of meaning may be an ideal, for most writers, but there is always room for different angles on a text, different understandings of central terms etc. However, despite this essential character of texts in general, it is usually possible for interpreters to come to *some* agreement concerning the basic concepts of a thinker. For instance, if someone put forth the view that *Being and Time* is a work of science fiction most people (or anyone who has read *Being and Time*) would disagree. Hence, there is a degree of (mis)interpretation which we can positively regard as mis-representation. In this essay I am essentially going to argue that Derrida provides a caricature of Husserl's thoughts concerning internal time-consciousness; hence, the Husserl he claims to present, to criticize, and then to supersede in his thinking of *différance*, is essentially his own fabrication or mis-representation. However, even though this may be the case there is still the possibility that some of Derrida's criticisms of phenomenology will hold. Concerning the latter possibility I will attempt to show that Derrida's thought is essentially self-refuting. I will argue that phenomenology's most definitive self-articulation in Husserl's „principle of principles” is essentially irrefutable. Denying this principle amounts to a self-undermining scepticism.

Derrida places much weight on the fact that phenomenology does not have its own specific language; it must communicate itself in German, English, French etc., languages imbued with a specific manner of conceptualizing the world, and a particular metaphysical history. In view of this it is surprising that Derrida does not take heed of the one central directive given

concerning the language of phenomenology². Phenomenological language claims to be a description arising out of an evident perception of the phenomenon under discussion; phenomenological thought claims to have its source in a reflective grasp of the phenomenon thematized.

We shall give a particular illustration of the character of phenomenological thought through presenting an analogy. If someone says to me: „there is a shovel in the shed”, the truth or falsity of the statement can only be determined by going and looking to see if there is actually a shovel in the shed. Moreover, suppose I do not know what a shovel is. Attempting to relieve me of my ignorance the person claiming that there is a shovel in the shed attempts to describe, as best they can, what a shovel looks like. I then go to the shed and look for the thing which matches, to some degree, what I have imagined on the basis of the description given. If I did not go to the shed I would neither determine the truth or falsity of the statement nor would I even really know what was meant by the word „shovel”. Having only the vague image I could only infer the meaning on the basis of the verbal description (think how difficult it is to convey the looks of a person to someone who has not met the person being described). Analogously, „phenomenological language”, to be *understood*, requires that one bring the phenomenon in question into one’s reflective regard and the truth or falsity of a „phenomenological claim” can also only be validated on this basis – by seeing whether what the language seems to be claiming matches up with what one reflectively beholds concerning the phenomenon in question. Derrida does not read Husserl in a phenomenological manner and therefore misconstrues what is being stated. Because of this his criticisms for the most part show themselves to be irrelevant or invalid.

Chapter 5 of *SP* begins with the following: „The force of this demonstration [Husserl’s demonstration] presupposes the instant as a point, the identity of experience instantaneously present to itself.” (Derrida 1973, p. 60).

This is already a distortion of Husserl’s conception. Firstly, when Husserl speaks of the temporal instant he frequently refers to it as the boundary point of a sequence of retentions (Husserl 1964, p. 95). Husserl’s concept of „retention” is, in the first instance, an attempt to describe and account for the fact that when I hear a melody, for instance, I am conscious of the having-been of tones which are no longer sounding. The very perception of a sequence of notes requires this; if the tones simply disappeared out of

² Derrida, in *SP*, refers again and again to the problem of a phenomenological language.

existence as soon as they ceased to sound there would be no possibility for me to be conscious of the developing melody or of any succession of notes. Consciousness would then have to be viewed as a light continuously switching on and off. If consciousness did have this character then we could have no awareness of any kind of temporal continuity, duration or succession. The now-point, or present instant, as it appears in Husserl's text refers to the fact that new tones are continually sounding. In terms of the sensation-content I am only given the now but I also have, necessarily, the series of retentions flowing-off, and the further away from the now-point they are – the having-been of the previously sounding tones – the more they fade out of my consciousness. The now-point for Husserl is always only the boundary of a series of retentions, and I am never aware of a now-content without it having a trail of retentions (Husserl 1964, pp. 92-95). Derrida, at certain points shows that he recognizes this, but he nevertheless affirms that Husserl's description of time-consciousness is governed by a notion of instantaneous punctuality.

On the succeeding page of the text Derrida acknowledges that in Husserl's view temporal-consciousness is consciousness of a temporal spread but he then states: „This spread is nonetheless thought and described on the basis of the now as point, as a „source-point”.” (Derrida 1973, p. 60).

When Husserl refers to the now as a „source point” he is, for the most part, referring to the beginning of the immanent existence of a temporal object such as the first sounding note of a melody; he is not referring to just any now (Husserl 1964, p. 50). We say, for instance, that any piece of music has its first note and last note; the whole piece is this temporally extended whole. Derrida goes on to describe the „source-point”, in this sense, as an „absolute beginning”, implying that nothing comes before (Derrida 1973, p. 60).

This shows Derrida's lack of attention to what, phenomenologically, is being described, and specifically to Husserl's distinctions between the different strata of consciousness. With reference to these strata, Husserl refers to the absolute flux, or absolute subjectivity, within which any immanent temporal object is constituted; any moment is only a moment within the flux and is not therefore self-subsistent (Husserl 1964, pp. 149-155). I think it is necessary to bring into view the types of phenomena to which Husserl is referring. Let us take the example of a bird in flight. Suppose I am standing at the top of a valley and I suddenly see a black bird wing its way on a particular flight path into the valley. The first moment at which the bird enters my vision could be said to be the „source-point” and it seems com-

pletely unproblematic to state that a new sensation has entered my field of vision. However, united with this are apprehensional characteristics; I do not see a black shape moving in the air (and even if I could only make out „a black moving shape” this is still an apprehension) *I see a gliding bird*; I see the changing movements of a bird. Perception always involves apprehension for Husserl; it is these apprehensions in their unity with sensation (even sensation-contents involve a conceptual content – I see „black” or „red”) which mark out or constitute the immanent unity of the temporally apprehended object. The immanent temporal object in this instance fades gradually out of retentive awareness just after the bird disappears from sight or when I look away to another object – in which case another immanent temporal unity is constituted. As a phenomenological description of the nature of the „source-point” and the running-off of the temporal object Husserl’s concepts seem completely accurate, hence I cannot see Derrida’s problem with the concept of the „source-point”. Perhaps it is due to the fact that he thinks any consciousness of identity involves an awareness of difference. However, Husserl is aware that consciousness of a now is always an awareness of a difference – temporal and apprehensional; the now is always relative to retentive modifications (Derrida 1973, pp. 92-93).

II.

Derrida continues his discussion by pointing to Husserl’s statement that the now is a „form that persists through continuous change of matter.” (Derrida 1973, p. 62).

Derrida then states:

Moreover, within philosophy there is no possible objection concerning this privilege of the present-now; it defines the very element of philosophical thought, it is evidence itself, conscious thought itself, it governs every possible concept of truth and sense. No sooner do we question this privilege than we begin to get at the core of consciousness itself from a region that lies elsewhere than philosophy, a procedure that would remove every possible security and ground from discourse (Derrida 1973, p. 62).

The above passage *sounds* very profound. Derrida is going to lead us to a kind of thinking that moves beyond evidence. But this impressive rhetoric is actually self-refuting. Firstly, is Derrida suggesting that we forego „conscious thought”, as if „unconscious thought” would be the move be-

yond philosophy? Moreover, the above suggests that Husserl is stuck with the notion of the now as something *purely* punctual; however, Husserl is aware that many judgments, for instance, require a complex line of retentions; this is in complete opposition to any atomistic concept of the now (Husserl 1964, pp. 182-188). For instance, the stages of a mathematical proof require the retention of previous stages – these must be *kept in mind* so that I can come to the next judgment. Another good example is the act of reading a text. A sentence takes time to read, the meaning is not grasped till the end of the sentence. Each word one reads requires the retention of what has already been read and a protention to be fulfilled by the following words; each word in turn modifies the meaning of the whole. However, understanding a sentence also requires that I retain what has already been understood. Husserl is aware of these structures and Derrida's reading of Husserl as committed to an atomistic conception of the now is completely misleading. We can state the following concerning the issue of evidence. To deny the primacy of evidence is to relegate oneself to meaninglessness. Is not Derrida trying to make something *evident* to us concerning Husserl's thought? All understanding involves a kind of evidence. Derrida claims to be uncovering the shifting ground of discourse. Is this *evident* to him? Is the shifting ground of discourse evident to Derrida? We are not denying that it might be, but if it is then Derrida's discourse operates within the sphere of evidence. To deny the primacy of evidence is to affirm skepticism, an ancient metaphysical standpoint, and a self-refuting one at that. Why would Derrida write if he did not believe in the possibility of others understanding him, thus of his thought becoming *evident* for the reader?

Derrida goes on to state that what is at stake is the privilege of the present. In relation to this he states: „This conflict, necessarily unlike any other, is between philosophy, which is always a philosophy of presence, and a meditation on nonpresence...” (Derrida 1973, p. 63).

Is Derridean thinking a meditation on the non-presence of non-presence? Or is it a meditation on the presence of non-presence? If it is the former, if there is no evidence for the being of non-presence why would the thought occur to one, and if it did why would it not be just a fantasy unworthy of thought? We presume that Derrida has reasons, or insights or at least intimations concerning the need for a meditation on non-presence. However, this means that there is evidence for non-presence, non-presence is something that *presences* in Derrida's thinking. With this we have answered our second question above; the presence of non-presence reinstates the primacy of evidence. More generally, to further emphasize our statements con-

cerning evidence; to show the lack of primacy of evidence would require that this lack become evident; but this again would be *evidence*. Although in many respects Derrida is self-reflective in his way of writing and thinking, self-canceling statements such as the above show that he has not thought the content of his thoughts against their very character as thoughts. Derrida's statements are akin to the following well-known philosophical examples of self-canceling statements:

1) *There is no such thing as truth.*

2) *All generalizations are wrong.*

Following his self-refuting statements concerning evidence Derrida refers to Husserl's denial of the possibility of an unconscious content. It is true that Husserl states this in his early lectures on internal time-consciousness, but this is not true of Husserl's later views. In later elaborations of his phenomenology of time-consciousness Husserl mentions the possibility of an unconscious content (Husserl 1964, pp. 393-394; Seebohm 1995, pp. 190-192). However, this need not concern us here.

After ascribing an atomistic concept of the present to Husserl and linking this to the idea of evidence (also described as implying the now as a pure instant) Derrida goes on to show that actually Husserl does not hold a notion of the now as something instantaneous. In relation to this Derrida states that „one sees quickly that the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is *continuously compounded* with a nonpresence and nonperception, with primary memory and expectation (retention and protention) (Derrida 1973, p. 64). Here, as elsewhere, Derrida fails to appreciate the context of Husserl's statements, which makes clear the specific meaning being stated. Derrida quotes the following from Husserl's lectures on time-consciousness:

[I]f we call perception the act in which all „origination" lies, which constitutes originarily, then primary remembrance is perception. For only in primary remembrance do we see what is past; only in it is the past constituted, i.e., not in a representative but in a presentative way (Derrida 1973, p. 64).

This is one of a string of related quotations from Husserl's *Lectures on the Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* that Derrida turns to. Alexander points out that the order in which Derrida quotes Husserl is almost the reverse of the order of their appearance in the text; she suggests that Husserl is progressively building a more complex picture and that these quotations must be understood within this context (Alexander 1995, pp. 137-138). We shall illustrate to what extent this is the case.

The next quotation from Husserl in *SP* is the following:

If we now relate what has been said about perception to the differences of the givenness with which temporal Objects make their appearance, then the antithesis of perception is primary remembrance, which appears here, and primary expectation (retention and protention), whereby perception and non-perception continually pass over into one another (Derrida 1973, p. 65).

Derrida then quotes Husserl again. These quotations all serve, for Derrida, to show that there is a kind of tension between thinking of retention as perception (something present) and retention as non-perception (according to Derrida absence or non-evidence).

Derrida states:

The difference between retention and reproduction, between primary and secondary memory, is not the radical difference Husserl wanted between perception and nonperception; it is rather a difference between two modifications of nonperception (Derrida 1973, p. 65).

Let us now illustrate why this is a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of Husserl. In the first quotation above Husserl speaks of originary consciousness. In this sense retention differs from reproductive consciousness and can therefore be called perception. Why is this the case? The reason Husserl affirms this difference seems fairly unproblematic. How could we recollect something that we experienced or saw if we had not first perceived it? If recollection of something did not involve an interior representation of something perceived (or thought or believed), i.e. at one time presented, then it would be no different from a mere fantasy, a fiction. I simply could not recollect the manner in which the bird glided into the valley – the bird I saw yesterday – if I had not first *seen* the bird glide into the valley. However, this originary perception necessarily involves retention; any perception of movement across time requires retention. I could not be aware of the bird's gliding deeper into the valley if, at the point when the bird is deeper in the valley, I did not preserve a sense for where it was a moment ago and the moment before that etc. If the bird is gliding in a curve I have a remembrance of the curve at the point of the flowing now; I *see* the bird's *path of flight*. Since this seeing would be impossible without retention, retention can be called perception. It differs from secondary remembrance – recollection and memory etc. – because reproductive consciousness in principle requires an originary perception. We can now turn to the second quotation. If we consider the notion of perception in a narrower

sense we shall see why retention might be the antithesis of perception. The example of a melody will provide perhaps the clearest illustration. Let us consider the first note of a melody; let us imagine the point at which the tone first reaches my hearing – the very instant it first sounds or first arrives in consciousness. There is a sense in which one could call this a pure perception or a consciousness of the pure now. However, as Husserl notes, to speak in this way is, in a sense, to speak of an abstraction, a mere ideal limit. But if this is the case then why speak of it at all? This follows from the fact that if we are to speak of retention we implicitly assume something that was first given so as to be able to pass over into retention. It implies something first perceived in the now and from then retained – a move from sensation to retention; hence, in principle, to be retained something must first be given in the form of the now. Although the now-form always implies and relates to retention and protention one can see how perception in the strictest sense can only be such a pure now. Hence, in this sense, it makes perfect sense to speak of retention as the antithesis to perception; however, it also makes perfect sense to point out that retention is a form of originary givenness because without it no immanent temporal object could be constituted, or *be*. I would not even be able to state with certainty that I am now sitting in front of a computer if it were not for retention. We can also see, in the sense in which reproductive consciousness is dependent upon retentional consciousness, the necessity for the important distinction between them.

Derrida claims that an uneasiness that can be detected in Husserl's desire to keep retention in the realm of primordality and contrast it, to such a degree, with secondary remembrance (Derrida 1973, pp. 66-67). We do not regard this as stemming from any uneasiness, but as an attempt to remain true to the manner in which temporal phenomena show themselves. Derrida suggests that a comparison of (a) and (b) reveals a tension in Husserl's thought:

- (a) The living now is constituted as the absolute perceptual source only in a state of continuity with retention taken as nonperception... (b) The source of certitude in general is the primordial character of the living now; it is necessary therefore to keep retention in the sphere of primordial certitude and to shift the frontier between the primordial and the nonprimordial... (Derrida 1973, p. 67).

In responding to (b) we can dissolve this „apparent” tension. Derrida implies that Husserl keeps retention in the sphere of the primordial because phenomenology would collapse if the evidence of the „living now” were

undermined (Derrida 1973, p. 66). We read Husserl differently. We can, firstly, approach this issue from a more Kantian perspective. The very condition of the possibility of experience requires that there be an evidence-giving retention. Without retention we would simply not be able to have the most basic experiences and perceptions. The perception of duration, or succession, for example, would simply be impossible and surely no one would doubt that we have an awareness of succession. Even from a practical point of view retention, and protention, prove to be absolutely necessary. I would not even be capable of crossing a road; without retention and protention, I would not be able to cognize the fact that cars are progressively approaching me. A second argument, more in line with the general spirit of Husserl's phenomenology than a Kantian-like transcendental idealist argument concerning the conditions of the possibility of experience, is based on a more directly phenomenological grasp of temporal phenomena. Let us imagine that I am hearing „ringing bells”; on reflecting on such an experience I find that my awareness is of enduring tones and my awareness is most clear and fresh around the now-phase of the ringing tones – suggesting the continuity of shading back from the now-point. Hence, the primordial character of retention is something which is clearly phenomenologically ascertainable. The shift between the primordial and the non-primordial, from the polarity between perception in the idealized (abstractive) sense and retention, to perception in a broader sense (retention, primal impression, protention) and re-presentation, follows from the numerous arguments we have given.

From this point on, on the basis of mis-representations and mis-conceptions of Husserl's phenomenology of time-consciousness Derrida introduces his famous concepts, or, rather, „non-concepts”, of the „trace” and „différance” (Derrida 1973, pp. 67-104). It is of interest to note here that Husserl already, in a certain sense, had a concept of „différance”. For instance, he talks of the pure now as being in a relation of difference to the modifications of retention; there is a contrast of the ever emerging new sensation-content united with apprehensional characters in the flowing now with the continual modification of primal sensation into retention; this difference is constitutive of the identity of the ever-emerging new-contents (Husserl 1964, p. 91). Hence, self-identity is here constituted by a difference. Although this is not identical to Derrida's notion of *différance* it further illustrates the fact that Husserl does not have a crude notion of the self-identity of the instant.

III.

We have illustrated some of the many problems with Derrida's account of Husserl. However, we may still ask whether Derrida has any arguments, aside from the already described mis-representation of Husserl's thought, which threaten the very possibility of phenomenology. If anything could serve this purpose it would be his stress on the primacy of *différance*. In this respect, the most crucial aspect of Derrida's notion of *différance* is its questioning of the legitimacy of phenomenological reflection. Phenomenology claims to be the science of lived experience. However, the grasping of something phenomenologically always has a reflective character. For instance, earlier I asked the reader to imagine the flight of a bird in order to illustrate essential things concerning the structure of the „living perception” of such a phenomenon. However, none of us were *actually* seeing a bird fly into a valley while we reflected on the character of an *actual* seeing. One might argue, from a Derridean perspective, that this example reveals the primordially of *différance*. We are neither in the same time nor in the same mode of consciousness as the event itself, yet we are claiming implicitly that a reflective consciousness can grasp the essential structures of the living perception of a transcendent object. It is this absence, which stands between phenomenological practice and the „things themselves”, that is really at the heart of Derrida's critique of phenomenology. However, this becomes a problem only if we agree that „*différance*” justifies a certain sort of skepticism. Husserl met similar objections in his own day and responded to them; we can turn to one such response, in *Ideas I*, in order to evaluate whether an objection such as Derrida brings actually poses a threat to phenomenology. We shall turn to two quotations from Watt, dealing with issues which Husserl addresses in *Ideas I* and which we claim to be essentially the same as Derrida's questioning of the possibility of phenomenology. Watt states:

each of us lives mentally. Only he does not know it. And if he were to know it, how can he know that his mental living is in actuality as he thinks it is? (...) Is a phenomenology possible and in which sense? (Husserl 1998, p. 183).

We think this is essentially the same concern as Derrida's in that Derrida believes that because of the „*différance*” separating „lived experiences” from reflective awareness we can never be sure we are grasping the very character of „lived experiences”. Husserl, in relation to another statement, similar in essence to the statement by Watt quoted above, asks whether it is

too much to state that just a moment ago I was attending to this book (Husserl 1998, p. 185). Clearly such a reflective awareness is, for any sound-minded, normally functioning human mind, so self-evident that it would simply be foolish to doubt it. The specific statement by Watt that Husserl responds to in this way is the following: „psychology must make it clear that in the case of self-observation the relation to something objective pertaining to mental processes changes.” (Husserl 1998, p. 185).

Husserl points out that such statements make evident a certain self-refuting skepticism. This is the kind of skepticism that we have ascribed to Derrida. For does not the claim that something changes in the transition from perception to reflection itself presuppose an access to this change or difference.

Husserl states:

All genuine skepticism of whatever kind and persuasion is indicated by the essentially necessary countersense that, in its argumentations, it implicitly presupposes as conditions of the possibility of its validity precisely what it denies in its theses. (Husserl 1998, p. 185).

We already drew attention to Derrida's skepticism, already in discussing his notions of nonpresence and „non-evidence”. However, we believe that our criticism of his skepticism holds also for his claims concerning the priority of „différance” and his affirmation of „absence”. Does not the claim concerning the priority of „absence” and „différance” presuppose that one has caught sight of the facticity of absence? If this is the case then, through the very fact of showing that „différance” is more basic than presence one is in fact demonstrating the evidence of „différance”. If „différance” is evident then consciousness is not ruled primarily by „différance”, but transcends this difference. Hence, contrary to Derrida's claim that „différance” provides the condition of the possibility of their being a transcendental subject (Husserl 1998, p. 185), we reaffirm the priority of cognition – of the acts of transcendental subjectivity.

We have demonstrated that Derrida presents an extremely distorted picture of Husserl's thoughts concerning time-consciousness and have shown that, far from refuting the possibility of a phenomenological philosophy, Derrida's thought, in *SP*, turns out to be a self-canceling skepticism. Let us end with an affirmation of phenomenology's unshakable „principle of principles”:

No conceivable theory can make us err with regard to the principle of principles: that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cogni-

tion, that everything originarily (so to speak, in its „personal” actuality) offered to us in „intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there (Husserl 1998, p. 185).

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