

## PHENOMENOLOGY AFTER DECONSTRUCTION: VOICE AND PHENOMENON AS A PROLEGOMENON TO HUSSERL'S GENETIC METHOD

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**ABSTRACT.** Reading *Voice and Phenomenon* from a phenomenological perspective, this paper argues that the book is an internal criticism of Husserlian phenomenology that, among other things, can serve as an introduction to Husserl's genetic method. Derrida's most powerful arguments are delivered by turning the Cartesian method of *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I* to Husserl's inquiries into time-consciousness; as such, it is a phenomenological criticism through and through. An analysis of Husserl's later manuscripts and lectures published posthumously shows that driven by what Derrida calls the radicality of intuitionism, Husserl has developed a genetic phenomenological method that breaks free from the metaphysics of presence and arrived at a conception of meaning and language that is similar to Derrida's.

**Keywords:** genetic phenomenology; Edmund Husserl; Jacques Derrida; *Voice and Phenomenon*

To say the phenomenological and deconstructive camps are in conflict with each other is an understatement. Just like phenomenologists see deconstructive thinkers' treatment of Husserl as attempting at a "disenfranchisement of both his theory and his method" (Welton, *TOH* 1), one must be "bold enough to defend [Husserl]" within the deconstructive circle (Brough 503). However, not only did Derrida confess in his final years that "from the point of view of Husserl's fifth *Cartesian Meditation I* remain a strict phenomenologist" ("HJR" 72), even in *Voice and*

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*Phenomenon*, one of the ground zeroes for this mutual hostility, we are warned that “what is at issue is not to turn back away from transcendental phenomenology [...]. In this way we have just designated the primary intention – and the distant horizon – of the present essay” (Derrida, *VP* 39). Taking a phenomenological perspective, the present essay examines the primary intention of *Voice and Phenomenon* as well as its fulfillment, and explores, from the vantage point of hindsight, what was a distant horizon for Derrida. In more concrete terms, I will argue that *Voice and Phenomenon* is, among other things, an internal critique of Husserl’s phenomenological method that received an anachronistic reply in the form of genetic phenomenology. In doing so, I wish to do justice both to Derrida’s rigor and to Husserl’s relevance, qualities that have been dissimulated by their apparent clash. The two projects required for this paper – a close analysis of Derrida’s strategy of argumentation in *Voice and Phenomenon* and a lucid summary of Husserl’s genetic method – have been taken care of by renowned scholars of Derrida and Husserl respectively. Thus, the contribution I make with this paper is limited to bridging the two pieces into a harmonious whole.

I shall begin with the help of Leonard Lawlor, whose introduction to his new translation of *Voice and Phenomenon* analyzes the strategy of argument in the book. I will emphasize that Derrida’s most powerful points are delivered by turning Husserl’s specific phenomenological inquiries against his general method, and hence it is a phenomenological critique through and through. Focusing on the development of Derrida’s deconstructive endeavor, however, Lawlor ignores how Husserl offered a solution to the tension within phenomenology that motivated deconstruction. Similarly, when Donn Welton claims in his account of genetic phenomenology that the genetic method shows “a certain depth to [Husserl’s] transcendental analysis that deconstructive thinkers believe impossible” (Welton *TOH* 10), he is himself blind to how *Voice and Phenomenon* acknowledges, makes use of, and asks for more of this depth. What the two scholars bracketed in their works will be restored or supplemented, depending on the reader’s point of view, when the other half of our paper portrays genetic phenomenology encapsulated in Welton’s *The Origins of Meaning* and “The Systematicity of Husserl’s Transcendental Philosophy: From Static to Genetic Method” as a reply to – not a refutation of – Derrida’s invitation to go beyond the metaphysics of presence.

### **Derrida’s Invitation**

Derrida observes that there is a tension between two major motives within phenomenology: “the purity of formalism and the radicality of intuitionism” (*VP* 14). Combine this with the reminder not to turn back away from phenomenology, and

we arrive at the educated guess that *Voice and Phenomena* operates by turning Husserl's radical intuitionism against his pure formalism. Since it is well known that *Voice and Phenomenon* deconstructs the metaphysics of presence, our conjecture is verified if we can prove that (1) the formalist part of phenomenology exemplified in the first *Logical Investigation* is a symptom of metaphysics of presence and that (2) deconstruction is a practice of phenomenology's radical intuitionism.

The first task is relatively easy. As Lawlor points out, the first *Logical Investigation* valorizes "expression" over "indication" because "[e]xpression seems to present, while indication, an indicative sign, merely manifests something absent" (xiii). This is reinforced by Husserl's use of interior monologue as the way to pure expression (Lawlor xviii), or better still, by the (in)famous "principle of all principles" that Husserl puts forward in *Ideas I*:

*that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, 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 (44, emphasis Husserl's).*

According to this principle, the legitimizing power of evidence expires once we transgress its self-presence by introducing anything that is not offered in presentive intuition. Nothing screams "metaphysics of presence" louder than this.

Derrida's argumentation in *Voice and Phenomena* is neatly generalized by Lawlor as a "[demonstration] of the lack of cognitive foundation, that is, the lack of self-presence, for the security of the metaphysical decision" (xviii). We shall summarize it here by combining chapters 5 and 6 to reveal that its sole driving force is the radical intuitionism of phenomenology.<sup>2</sup> Basically, Derrida argues that there is no such thing as pure self-evidence even in interior monologue because within "the blink of an eye" during which we speak to ourselves there is already a temporal gap between the I who starts speaking and the I who listen to what I spoke via retention of phonetic forms, which thanks to temporization have become "repeatable to infinity and therefore beyond the acts of expression taking place right now" (Lawlor, "Translator's Introduction" xxii). The "last court of appeal" (Derrida, *VP* 8) for this argument is §16 of *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*,

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<sup>2</sup> We skip earlier chapters because they are what Lawlor categorizes in *Derrida and Husserl* as "phenomenological critique" in contrast to the so-called "super-phenomenological critique" that characterizes chapters 5 and 6 (32).

where Husserl calls retention a “non-perception” (Lawlor, “Translator’s Introduction” xxi). Since retention is operative in every act of presentation, it is entailed that there is no such thing as “originary presentive intuition” *simpliciter* required by the principle of principles of the metaphysics of presence.

Derrida never hides his indebtedness to Husserl, or as Lawlor puts it, perhaps all of Derrida’s thought flows from an insight in the fifth *Cartesian Meditation*, namely, “the experience of others (what he calls ‘*Fremderfahrung*,’ the experience of the alien) is always mediated by a *Vergegenwärtigung*, a presentification, which keeps the interior life of others necessarily hidden from me” (“Translator’s Introduction” xxiii). According to Lawlor, what Derrida adds to this insight is to reveal that this “non-presence” pervades all experience (xxiii), or in other words, Derrida pushes the radical intuitionism of phenomenology to the extreme at the cost of its formalism.

This attitude is reminiscent of how Husserl places Descartes in the history of philosophy, namely, as one who takes a decisive step (*First Philosophy* 60) yet fails “to lay hold of the genuine sense of [his] discovery” (66). In fact, we can assert that with deconstruction Derrida was trying to repeat what Husserl did to Descartes with phenomenology, “a neo-Cartesianism [... that rejects] nearly all the well-known doctrinal contents of the Cartesian philosophy” (Husserl, *CM* 1). A crucial difference between the two cases, however, is that unlike the historical distance that furnishes Husserl with the benefit of hindsight, the mere decades dividing Husserl and Derrida imply that Lawlor’s verdict that “phenomenology is a movement *toward* the outside of metaphysics” (“Translator’s Introduction” xxvi, emphasis Lawlor’s) – without ever breaking free from it – could be premature. The rest of this paper aims to prove that this is indeed the case.

### Husserl’s Reply

One of the biggest difficulties in studying Husserl is that, as the philosopher himself complained, “the greatest part of my work is stuck in my manuscripts [...]. Perhaps I am working, with all the humanly possible expenditure of energy, only for my posthumous works” (Welton *TOH* 221-2). This is reflected in *Voice and Phenomenon*, where the enormous gap between *Ideas I* and *The Crisis* was occupied by *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* alone, a book that, ironically, only contains texts written before the publication of *Ideas I*. In fact, had Derrida used *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* that came out one year earlier than *Voice and Phenomenon* instead of the 1928 book edited by Heidegger (if only titularly), he would have found in many of the appendices that Husserl had

moved far beyond the simple remark of retention being “non-perception.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, not even once did Derrida mention in *Voice and Phenomenon* Husserl's genetic method, which we will argue – based on Welton's interpretation – *has moved outside* the metaphysics of presence.

As if anticipating Derrida's invitation to pay more attention to indication, Husserl writes in *Experience and Judgment* that the analysis of indication in *Logical Investigations* “already forms there the nucleus of genetic phenomenology” (74-75). In short, genetic phenomenology concerns the temporal element operative in all the structures laid bare by the static method, which is hinted at in *Ideas I* when Husserl remarks that the transcendental “absolute” that is brought about through phenomenological reduction is in fact not what is truly ultimate, but something that “has its primal source in what is ultimately and truly absolute” (193): time-consciousness. Motivated by this discovery, a phenomenologist rescinds two abstractions that enabled the reduction required by the Cartesian program, but instead of relapsing to the naivety of the natural attitude, she has at her disposal two new concepts. “Pure ego,” the empty, formal pole of identity, becomes a concrete “monad” who acquires “habitualities” and is internally connected to others; the world, which was reduced into a counter-pole of consciousness, is now “reframed as a concrete horizon that has undergone a process of sedimentation in which past achievements have been deposited into its being” (Welton, “From Static to Genetic Method” 276).

Since Husserl's genetic inquiries are diverse and often exceed our current concern, we shall reserve our attention to how the genetic turn affects his doctrine of meaning. Welton summarizes Husserl's later account of the speech-act as follows:

Speech, thought of as active synthesis, takes place against a passive context of an acquired language and prior established meanings fixed by a community of speakers, who, for their part, stake active claims of their own. Previously active constructions become sedimented and thus part of our sensibility; *our sense of things falls under their spell as well* (“From Static to Genetic Method” 281, emphasis ours).

This dynamic interplay between the passive and the active is close to what Derrida would call “trace,” “arche-writing,” etc. and suffices to refute his claim that “nothing [in *Logical Investigations*] was put back into question in a decisive way” (VP 3):

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<sup>3</sup> See 388-393, for example, for a meticulous account about the double intentionality involved in the analysis of time-consciousness. It should be noted that even this book covers only one of the three main stages in Husserl's decades-long grapple with time-consciousness.

meanings, instead of timeless, inhering entities that a solipsistic ego summons to announce pure presence, are inherited from the linguistic (and hence intersubjective) community and saturated with absence. However, given that Welton does not accompany this synopsis with quotes from Husserl's texts, it is possible (if only chronologically) that the above is but a Husserlian paraphrase of Derridean ideas. Fortunately, in *The Origins of Meaning* Welton does follow in detail Husserl's departure from the metaphysics of presence via the genetic method, which is piecemeal, incomplete, but at the same time determined and decisive. For the purpose of this investigation, we will borrow materials that Welton collects and rearrange them to delineate how later developments in Husserlian phenomenology amount to a decoupling of language and perception, the epitome of presentation.

Even in *Ideas I*, where Husserl attempts to limit the function of expression to lifting senses constituted in other kinds of intentional acts to the sphere of the conceptual (Welton, *TOM* 303) and conceives of language as a mere "garb of thought" (272), he already observes that "the level of meaning [*Bedeuten*] is not – and in principle is not – a kind of reduplication of the under-stratum" (303) and that "all concepts originate from experience, the universal [*allgemein*] as well as the particular [...]. We must be ready to *change them* in conformity with it" (299, emphasis ours), which entail that meanings are neither timeless nor static. If this appears to be a case of Husserl's intuitionism nudging at his formalism unwittingly, then the notion of clarification (*Klärung*) thematized in *Ideas III* proves that he is well aware that meanings are open-ended, and as such they cannot ensure pure presence. Unlike explication that operates within the self-contained sphere of language, clarification seeks validity by turning meanings against perceptions, which, besides modifying existing meanings, allows for the creation of new meanings "either by a new juxtaposition of established signs or by finding new signs which meet the demands of the dialogue" (Welton, *TOM* 292). The realization of the heterogeneity between linguistic meaning and perceptual sense led to a genetic understanding of perception that Husserl developed in the 1920s, which is now available to the public in *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*. According to the genetic model, it is the "proto-apprehension" at the level of "hyletic constitution" that gives a series of senses for the subject to work on and thus founds apprehension "understood as a perception of the object" (235-6), not the subject's meaning-bestowing act turning *hyle* (formless sensual data) into a profile representing an object. Hence, genetic phenomenology is immune to the attack Derrida launches in Chapter Seven of *Voice and Phenomenon* with "the extreme case of a 'statement about perception'" (79): it acknowledges that "[n]ever will [the] structure [of language] be able to make with

intuition a 'unity of intimate merging' " (79), albeit it is achieved by a deeper understanding of perception instead of taking the Derridean route of considering language in itself.

In fact, the argument in *Voice and Phenomenon* is further weakened when we turn to Husserl's later meditations on language, specifically how he refined the distinction between expression and indication and thus retracted the metaphysical privilege of monologue. Contrary to Derrida's claim that the strict distinction between expression and indication remained intact throughout Husserl's career, the latter reflected on this issue between 1905 and 1908 (Welton, *TOM* 8) and reached the conclusion that expressions are not entities different from signs but "signs [...] taken in abstraction from their indicating function" (300). Interior monologues, accordingly, are performed using language in abstraction from its communicative function, which is presupposed nevertheless given that "[t]hinking is performed at the very outset as linguistic" (Welton, *TOM* 276) and that "language is from the very outset intersubjective" (274). In *The Origin of Geometry*, Husserl puts forward the famous assertion:

"[The] process of projecting and successfully realizing occurs, after all, purely within the subject of the inventor, [... yet] geometrical existence is not psychic existence; it does not exist as something personal within the personal sphere of consciousness; it is the existence of what is objectively there for "everyone" (for actual and possible geometers, or those who understand geometry) (*Crisis* 356).

If read in the light of the essential distinctions in *Logical Investigations*, this formulation does imply that geometric concepts are timeless entities that ground the metaphysics of presence, but now, having acquired some understanding of Husserl's genetic method, we can clearly see that the process of thinking within the subject should be taken as a linguistic process, and that geometrical existences are for everyone as linguistic meanings carried by signs, opinions that Derrida would not hesitate to subscribe to.

Let us recapitulate. Derrida's accusation of phenomenology as metaphysics of presence holds true when applied to the static method that undergirds *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I*, but in lectures and manuscripts that remained unavailable to the public during Husserl's lifetime, a different method driven by the same impetus of radical intuitionism as *Voice and Phenomenon* quietly took shape and moved away from the metaphysics of presence, which Husserl failed to introduce systematically but was operative in his later works like *Cartesian Meditations* and *Crisis*. As Kortooms points out, Husserl has the (bad) habit of conducting analyses ahead of their current context (Kortooms 258), and it is in this sense that *Voice*

*and Phenomenon* serves as an excellent prolegomenon to Husserl's genetic phenomenology. Whether this conforms to Derrida's original intentions we are not sure, but the author is dead after all, and he is well aware of it.

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