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The Missing Pieces of Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon*

Abstract:

Jacques Derrida's critique of Edmund Husserl in *Voice and Phenomenon* targets several ways in which Husserl's theory of signs is said to remain dependent on a model of presence, and therefore to be a form of onto-theology. In a sense this simply extends Martin Heidegger's own critique of Husserl as failing to account for what remains obscure behind any presentation to the mind. Yet Derrida's critique is ultimately more radical than Heidegger's, though the radicality is in this case unjustified. Namely, Derrida goes beyond Heidegger's critique of presence to mount an additional critique of "self-presence," which is more often known as "identity." Derrida's insufficiently motivated critique of identity leads to additional problems for his philosophy.

Keywords:

Jacques Derrida, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, ontotheology, self-presence

The primary danger of recent philosophies is not that they are recent and therefore a degeneration from some past golden age; this is merely the inadequate trump card forever played by conservatives. Instead, the major risk of such theories is that they tacitly claim the mantle of permanent recency. Consider for instance the new attitude toward the history of philosophy in the wake of Gilles Deleuze. As is well known, Deleuze generally steers away from the major heroes of the history of philosophy – Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and Hegel – and self-consciously promotes a "minor" tradition that features such figures as the Stoics, Duns Scotus, Spinoza,

Hume, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Simondon.¹ Although refreshing in its own way, there is a serious problem with this approach. The first is the sheer implausibility of driving the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and Hegel away from the center of philosophy. They have long been stationed there for very good reasons, and if we collectively agree to look elsewhere for a generation or two, this needs to be followed by inviting them back from the wilderness even if dressed in new clothing. To champion a minor tradition in any field is a good way of shaking things up and scaring away the antique dealers for a time, but it cannot be the basis for sustained, long-term achievement. Above all, the classic figures are immeasurably more fruitful than the tedious words of their often desiccated contemporary spokespersons would suggest. Julián Marías was right to say, for instance, that “whenever philosophy has established *real* contact with Aristotle, it has immediately become more precise and serious.”²

A similar problem occurs more intensely in connection with the career of Jacques Derrida. Quite apart from anything he actually wrote, Derrida is widely associated with an atmosphere of utterly radical subversion of everything that came before him. Predictably enough, this results in the formation of two equally radical camps. There are those who dismiss him as a clown and a fraud, and others who treat him as a near-messianic figure in philosophy: as someone who renders it impossible even to use traditional philosophical vocabulary without adding scare quotes or various qualifying asides, whether in needless parentheses or long-winded exergues and addenda. I have long been on record as strongly disliking this style, and there is no reason to repeat my criticisms here, especially since the present article is concerned with Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon*, perhaps his least annoying work in stylistic terms.³ In this relatively early book, Derrida simply mounts a serious critique of Husserl and draws certain philosophical conclusions from the exercise. His good knowledge of the phenomenological tradition makes him perfectly qualified to do this, and there is considerable value in his interpretation of how the metaphysics of presence haunts Husserlian philosophy. That does not mean that he has settled the question, or that he has covered all relevant aspects of his theme. We must also resist the tacit Derridean claim (of which Heidegger is equally guilty) that his ubiquitous critique of “metaphysics” means that he operates on a level completely different in kind from that of his predecessors. In *Voice and Phenomenon* Derrida defends a definite philosophical thesis just like those who came before, one that is to be judged on its strengths and weaknesses like any other. It is every bit as susceptible to critique or reversal as the claims of Plato, Aristotle, or Hegel, without scare quotes or puns, and without accusing Derrida of “remaining classical” in some respect or of “remaining within the language of metaphysics.” Such gesticulations of revolutionary critique are generally futile, and should be abandoned in favor of a closer consideration of what any given author has to say.

By way of preview, it can be said that I will make two basic criticisms of *Voice and Phenomenon*. The first concerns Derrida's critique of presence. While I am with him in his objections to the “voice” as a purported site of direct presence of reality to the thinking subject, I am much closer to Heidegger's turn to absence as an alternative to presence, and less sympathetic to Derrida's insistence that absence fails because any self-identical absent reality would be guilty of “self-presence.” Certain idealist ontologies, such as those of Hegel or Husserl, do promote theories of self-presence, given their elevation of the concept or the idea to the pinnacle of reality. The same critique can hardly be made of Heidegger, whose world is so filled with opacity that it is difficult to find any self-presence of Dasein to itself, much less the self-presence of any hammer or railway platform to itself.⁴

1) Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

2) Marías, *History of Philosophy*.

3) Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon*. For a sample of my previous criticisms see Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 110–16 and Harman, *Skirmishes: With Friends*, 141–50, 184–89.

4) Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

To summarize, Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence does not justify a further critique of identity and a consequent turn to *différance*. Second, and more importantly, Derrida follows most readers of Husserl in completely missing the greatest innovation of phenomenology: Husserl's sharp turn away from the "bundle of qualities" theory that characterized British Empiricism, as is still found even in the work of Franz Brentano.⁵ The heart of the matter is phenomenology's shift from a priority of bundles to a priority of intentional objects, yet Derrida overlooks this point entirely.

1. Voice and Presence in Husserl

Voice and Phenomenon is not only one of Derrida's most straightforwardly written books (much more so than the important but somewhat affected *Of Grammatology*, published in the same year).⁶ It also resembles a storm-cloud filled with themes that will rain from his writings in the decades to come. At the center of the book is his claim that philosophy as we know it has always been devoted to presence (53), which Derrida aims to overthrow, thereby following Heidegger in certain respects.⁷ He is confident that history is on his side in this effort, since we have already entered the era of the "closure of metaphysics" (44). He notes a link between writing (69) and *différance* (71, 75), in this fertile year of 1967 in which his collection *Writing and Difference* also appeared.⁸ Late in *Voice and Phenomenon* the floodgates open, and we are introduced to such Derridean passwords as the non-proper (67), the trace, archi-writing, spacing (73), and the supplement (74). "The unnameable" is invoked (66), as well as death (80), and we even encounter the celebrated theme of how the possibility of something is also often the same as its impossibility (87). The multiple references to *Geist* or *Geistigkeit* (70) point forward to Derrida's famous critique of Heidegger two decades later in *Of Spirit*.⁹ There is even a brief glimpse of the theme of touching (68), the topic of his later book on Jean-Luc Nancy.¹⁰ *Voice and Phenomenon*, then, is less an isolated book than an overture to the remaining thirty-seven years of Derrida's philosophical career.

The whole of *Voice and Phenomenon* orbits the important distinction in Husserl's *Logical Investigations* between expression (*Ausdruck*) and meaning (*Bedeutung*), to which the whole of the First Investigation is devoted;¹¹ (note that Lawlor's translation of Derrida usually employs "indication" for *Bedeutung*, whereas Findlay's rendering of Husserl uses "meaning" instead). Husserl notes that a sign can function as either an expression or an indication. While there is no room here to cover the various examples Husserl gives of the two cases, suffice it to say that in expression the sign makes the thing in question directly present to us while in indication the sign points beyond itself and turns our attention elsewhere. An arrow or proper name functions in such a way as to *indicate* something, while an *expressive* sign would be one that maintains our focus directly on this sign without urging our attention beyond itself. For instance, to look at a dog in adequate intuition would be an expressive "sign" of the dog itself. Husserl, of course, declares the latter to be a privileged form of knowledge. Now, if it seems difficult to find examples of pure expression or pure indication devoid of its opposite, that is precisely Derrida's point. Namely, if an expressive sign claims to place something directly before us, such presence is precisely what Derrida's philosophy aims to challenge. He is not

5) Brentano, *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint*; Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

6) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

7) Throughout this article, all page references in parentheses refer to Derrida, *Speech and Phenomenon*.

8) Derrida, *Writing and Difference*.

9) Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*.

10) Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*.

11) Husserl, "Expression and Meaning," 181–234.

alone in this enterprise. Heidegger, too, built his intellectual career around an effort to contest the traditional “metaphysics of presence” in which entities are misunderstood as “present-at-hand” (*vorhanden*) rather than in their genuine secluded being.¹²

It is of course not difficult to interpret Husserl as a philosopher of presence; he would no doubt be the first to accept this designation. The purpose of Husserlian phenomenology is to replace such indirect means of knowledge as revelation and even science, supplanting them with a painstaking description of what lies directly before the mind. The key concept of phenomenology is “intentionality,” a medieval term revived by Husserl’s (and Sigmund Freud’s) teacher Brentano, which means that every mental act has an object: to perceive is to perceive something, to judge is to judge something, and to love or hate something is also to direct those emotions toward some object.¹³ But it is here that Husserl breaks with his teacher in at least two significant ways, both pertaining to the precise status of intentional objects. One difference concerns the question of whether such objects are “real” or merely “in the mind.” Brentano’s position is that intentional objects exist in what he calls “immanent objectivity,” and are not to be treated straightaway as objects of the outside world, though Brentano never fully clarifies the relation between immanence and transcendence. It was the Polish philosopher (and Brentano student) Kazimierz Twardowski who pushed phenomenology to take up this question more seriously; he did so by proposing a division between “objects” outside the mind and “content” inside the mind.¹⁴ This idea of Twardowski’s had a decisive impact on Husserl, who responded with a contrary view in an early draft article entitled “Intentional Objects.”¹⁵ There, Husserl argued vehemently that no “merely intentional” or purely immanent object can possibly exist: if I think of something that does not exist, it is not an imaginary object, but somehow not an object at all. Here as always, Husserl denies the possibility of anything like a Kantian thing-in-itself that would exist in its own right beyond all possible human access. The roots of his idealism can be found in this early position, and thus I am not among those who believe that Husserl was only a full-blown idealist in such later works as the 1914 *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, generally known in abbreviated form as *Ideas I*.¹⁶ It is also worth noting that despite his ostensible disagreement with Twardowski, Husserl ended up retaining the former’s distinction between “object” and “content,” while simply flattening them onto the same plane. This modified borrowing from Twardowski turns out to be the most important and original aspect of Husserlian phenomenology, and also leads to the second difference between Husserl and Brentano.

Central to Brentano’s philosophy is the notion that all forms of intentionality – judgments, wishes, and emotions – are grounded in *presentations* as the root form of all mental acts. This might seem like nothing more than common sense: if something is not present to our minds at all, how could we possibly judge it, wish for it, calculate it, feel love or hatred toward it? The problem concerns how to define the “it” at which our intentional acts are aimed. A few minutes ago my wife and I ordered Mother’s Day flowers to send to my mother in Iowa. The website we used displayed a photograph of the flowers we ordered, taken from a specific angle under determinate lighting conditions. Now obviously, we were ordering the flowers and not the picture of the flowers; it would be infuriating if my mother were to receive nothing tomorrow but a photograph from the delivery man. But our concern here is with a different distinction. Namely, when we ordered the flowers, were we ordering the exact, motionless configuration of colors and shapes depicted on the computer screen? That would be roughly

12) See Harman, *Tool-Being*; Harman, *Heidegger Explained*.

13) Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*.

14) Twardowski, *On the Content and Object of Presentations*.

15) Husserl, “Intentional Objects.”

16) Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology*.

Hume's position. For him, flowers like anything else are just a "bundle of qualities" which entails that rather than a unified "object," the flowers are merely a set of traits that shift over time: sometimes gradually as when someone views them from slightly different vantage points, sometimes suddenly as when my mother receives the flowers and is able to smell them in a way that we as online shoppers cannot. This British Empiricist tradition of bundle-theories resurfaces later in extreme form in Alfred North Whitehead, for whom an entity actually *perishes* from moment to moment as its qualities change, being replaced by a close successor rather than enduring through changes of properties, however trivial those changes may be.¹⁷ There is nothing in Brentano to combat the Humean model of objects, given his aforementioned view that "[intentions] are either presentations or founded upon presentations."¹⁸ And this is where Husserl shows his originality in a way that has been widely overlooked. Namely, rather than being grounded in presentations, Husserl declares that intentionality consists of "object-giving acts."¹⁹ In other words, we do not intend the *entirety* of our presentation of an object, but rather the object itself, which remains robustly as it is through countless minor variations. This is why Husserl emphasizes that an object must be distinguished from its various "adumbrations" (*Abschattungen*), such as the exact way the flowers appear in a photograph or in person. For Husserl, to see the flowers does not mean to see an exact set of informational contents, but rather to intend an invariant unity – an *object* – that can be experienced in countless different ways. It is Twardowski's old object-content distinction, but with both terms now immanentized. Husserl would not agree to see it that way, but only because he would be annoyed by the insinuation that he is confined to "immanence": for him, the Berlin we encounter in the mind and the Berlin that exists in the real world are one and the same. But for OOO (object oriented ontology), of course, nothing in Husserl's intellectual universe would qualify as "real," since reality entails withdrawal from the mind and from anything else as well. To return to the main point, the central topic of Husserlian philosophy is the tense relation between an intentional object and its qualities. Derrida pays little or no attention to this gap, just as Heidegger does not, since both are exhaustively concerned with the entirely different point that Husserl is too committed to the direct presence of reality to the mind.

Derrida is right to remind us that phenomenology is based on a "principle of all principles," meaning that all truth must be grounded in the direct presence of something to the mind: "[in an] originary giving evidentness, the *present* or *presence* of sense in a full and originary intuition" (4). The privilege of presence "defines the very element of philosophical thought. It is *evidentness* itself, conscious thought itself" (53). For this reason, phenomenology can be described as "the metaphysical project itself" (5). Phenomenology belongs entirely to "the classical metaphysics of presence," or "classical ontology," which amount to the same thing (22). Here Derrida strikes a Heideggerian tone in his reactions to both Husserl and "classical ontology." To what extent is this correct? In Husserl's case it is largely so, even if it misses the aforementioned object-quality rift that runs perpendicular to the theme of presence. Here Derrida largely mirrors Heidegger's argument in *History of the Concept of Time*, though in fairness it should be noted that this 1925 Marburg Lecture Course was not published until 1979, more than a decade after *Voice and Phenomenon*.²⁰ In any case, the opening sections of Heidegger's course include some of the most important appreciations *and* criticisms of Husserl that have ever been written. Heidegger stresses the fact that Husserl never raises the question of the *being* of consciousness, which means that Husserl treats consciousness as if it were something obvious and transparent at a glance. Derrida's own emphasis is on the fact that Husserl's commitment to direct presence is what motivates him to

17) Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

18) Brentano, as cited in Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 2, 556.

19) Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1, 276.

20) Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*; and Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*.

exclude signification or meaning in favor of expression. As Derrida cleverly puts it, Husserl actually stands for “non-signification as the ‘principle of all principles’” (51; emphasis removed). The signifier is to be accepted only in cases where it is “perfectly diaphonous” (69), as in the observation of one’s own conscious life.

It is fair to say that Husserl excludes everything tacit or implicit from the realm of philosophy. In this respect he is the polar opposite of his student Heidegger, who loves nothing more than the veiling, concealing, sheltering, harboring, and withdrawing of reality from direct contact, which largely explains his passion for Friedrich Hölderlin and other purveyors of poetic language.²¹ Not so for Husserl, who could hardly be more different in temperament from his former star pupil. For this Founding Father of phenomenology, “there is theoretical truth only in a statement” (22). As Derrida notes, “an intuitionistic theory of knowledge governs Husserl’s concept of language” (76). Since he excludes indications and other signs from the realm of truth, it is no surprise that he also has low regard for “gestures and facial expressions” (30). Derrida follows Heidegger in suggesting that all of this involves “[reawakening] the originary decision of philosophy in its Platonic form” (45), forgetting that the Platonic forms are exceedingly difficult to grasp, and that Socratic *philosophia* entails the failure of every attempted definition. But much like Hegel, though for different reasons, Husserl asserts “the absence of limits of objective reason. Everything that is, can be known ‘in itself’” (86; emphasis removed). This is again quite different from Heidegger, who explicitly takes Kant’s side in a widely overlooked passage: “what is the significance of the struggle initiated in German Idealism against the ‘thing-in-itself’ except a growing forgetfulness of what Kant had won, namely ... the original development and searching study of the problem of human finitude?”²² Another way of putting it is that for Husserl, “the irreducible and pure kernel of expression” (63) is the word “is,” in the purportedly self-evident sense of sheer presence. It is Husserl’s failure to ask about the meaning of “is” that leads to Heidegger’s posing of the question of being in the first place.²³

Derrida famously connects the theme of presence with that of the voice, as opposed in particular to writing. Husserl upholds a “unity of thought and voice in the *logos*” (64). His “distinction between expression and indication [assumes] an essential connection between expression and the *phone*” (66). For phenomenology, “no consciousness is possible without the voice. The voice is being close to itself in the form of universality, as con-sciousness. The voice *is* consciousness” (68). Derrida is able to justify this through Husserl’s assertion that speaking to oneself would not count as a form of communication, and therefore would not fall prey to the derivative form of the sign known as indication: “it is in a language without communication, in a monological discourse, in the absolutely lowest register of the voice, of the ‘*solitary life of the soul*,’ that it is necessary to track down the unmarred purity of expression” (19). Adding to his growing web of synonyms, Derrida identifies this pure expression of the voice as equivalent to “life” (9), and even to *Geistigkeit* (70). For him, this means that “the possibility of the sign is [by contrast, the] relation to death. The determination and the erasure of the sign in metaphysics is the dissimulation of this relation to death which nevertheless was producing signification” (46). More concretely, “the death of the writer and/or the disappearance of the objects that he has been able to describe – does not prevent a text from ‘meaning’” (79).

Insofar as “the voice hears itself” (65; emphasis removed), and “the speaker [hears] himself” (67; emphasis removed), we have a case of “pure auto-affection” (68; emphasis removed). In other words, the thinking self coincides with itself in thinking. Derrida continues: “the unity of the sound and the voice, which allows the voice to produce itself in the world as pure auto-affection, is the unique instance that escapes from the distinc-

21) Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*; and Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*.

22) Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 251–52.

23) This is the central argument of Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, 13–134.

tion between intramundanity and transcendentalism; and by the same token, it makes this distinction possible” (68). In layman’s terms, the complaint is that Husserl seems to think that we have direct and transparent access to our own thinking, which Derrida is right to regard as a dubious assumption: the very existence of psychoanalysis attests to the contrary. Beyond this, we will see in the next section that Derrida offers many reasons for why that sort of transparent presence is unattainable. This is why he claims that in Husserl’s case, there is a “self-presence of transcendental life” (26). In his famous article “*Ousia and Gramme*” he makes the same claim with respect to Hegel, which certainly fits with the traditional interpretation of the Hegelian philosophy (though it would be firmly contested by Slavoj Žižek and the Ljubljana School, given their way of reading Hegel’s universe as riddled with obstacles to full presence).²⁴ Yet Derrida does not limit his critique to such eminent philosophers of the subject as Husserl and Hegel. Instead, he expands the concept of self-presence beyond the realm of “thought thinking itself” and uses it as fuel for a campaign against identity.²⁵ This is the radical ambition contained in his principle of *différance* which excludes “presence” in both senses of the term: (1) the direct presence of reality to thought, and (2) the present instant as a “now” uncontaminated with anything past or future.²⁶ But he also wrongly projects this ambition retroactively back onto Heidegger, who is by no means an enemy of identity in Derrida’s sense. For instance, early in *Of Grammatology* we read as follows: “Heidegger’s insistence on noting that being is produced as history only through the logos, and is nothing outside of it, the difference between being and the entity – all this clearly indicates that fundamentally nothing escapes the movement of the signifier and that, in the last instance, the difference between signified and signifier is nothing.”²⁷ While this passage is an excellent summary of Derrida’s own position, it has little to do with Heidegger. For it is not Heidegger’s teaching that being is nothing outside its history as produced through the logos, nor does he hold that the difference between signified and signifier is nothing.

2. The Ways of Non-Presence

Deep into *Voice and Phenomenon*, Derrida serves up a sentence that might well be used as a motto for his book as a whole: “let us therefore attempt to interrogate the phenomenological voice, the transcendence of its dignity in relation to every other signifying substance” (66). One important problem Derrida sees is that phenomenology is “tormented, if not contested, from the inside, by means of its own descriptions of the movement of temporalization and of the constitution of intersubjectivity” (6). We will deal with temporality in the next section; for now, suffice it to say that Derrida sees Husserl as over-attached to a temporal model centered in the isolated “now.” But a problem already arises in connection with the mental life of other humans, since it is easy to see why this is something that can only be indicated rather than expressed: “the subjective side of [the other’s] experience, his consciousness, the acts by which in particular he endows sense to the signs, are not immediately and originally present as they are for him and as mine are for me” (33). In fact, there is no way to translate indications of the other’s consciousness into expressions; at most, it is I the interpreter of the other’s mental life who expresses something, not the others themselves (31). “The relation to the other as non-presence is therefore the impurity of expression” (34). Going beyond the limited question of other humans, there is more generally an “original and non-empirical space of non-foundation ... as the irreducible emptiness from which the security of pres-

24) Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*.

25) An especially strong book on this topic is Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*. Needless to say, Hägglund and I are on opposite sides as concerns the status of the law of identity.

26) See Derrida, “*Différance*.”

27) Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 22–23. For a critique of this passage see Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 195–99.

ence in the metaphysical form of ideality is decided and from which this security removes itself" (6). Ideality is a separate topic that will concern us shortly. But it is already clear for Derrida that, contra Husserl, experience is not founded in the direct presence of expression at all. Whereas Husserl identifies "life" with the voice and therefore with presence, for Derrida it is always a "strange unity" (12) of transcendence and its empirical other. This entails such an entanglement of consciousness and language as to "introduce non-presence and difference (mediacy, the sign, referral, etc.) right into the heart of self-presence" (13; punctuation modified).

Derrida locates another problem with presence in the supposed self-proximity of consciousness (50): the claim that thought can be directly present to itself, as Husserl supposes in keeping with the Cartesian tradition whose mantle he openly wears.²⁸ Derrida notes that Husserl, precisely by conceding that someone can *think* they are speaking to themselves (although there is never any genuine communication with oneself, but only pure expression), "seems to admit that there can be a simple exteriority between the subject such as he is in his actual experience and what he represents to himself to be living" (49). Stated simply, we do not have transparent access even to our own thoughts. With this concession, the dam of self-presence has already burst in such a way that Husserl's conception of the thinking subject's relation to itself is left on basically the same ontological plane as Heidegger's model of Dasein's basic perplexity about itself. The purported "auto-affection" of the presence of thought to itself has been subverted: "a pure difference [comes] to divide self-presence" (70). In other words, the auto-affection that Husserl imagined to be the guarantor of the purity of self-presence is the very factor that eliminates such purity (71). The realm of self-presence is therefore actually a kingdom of the "non-proper" (68), meaning something that has no autonomous or self-contained character, but is already interwoven with otherness. There is a "non-identity to oneself of so-called originary presence" (58).

The word "monad" immediately brings to mind the philosophy of G.W. Leibniz, for whom monads are unified substances that do not communicate with other monads, but are co-ordinated with them instead through the pre-established harmony of God.²⁹ Leibniz did add something new to the history of philosophy with his notion that entities other than humans can have interiors: inner sanctuaries in which the outside world is represented. Even so, the Leibnizian monad is simply a logical extension of the Aristotelian tradition of substance-philosophy, where substance means a real individual that remains itself despite numerous possible changes in its accidents, qualities, and relations.³⁰ Derrida does not belong to this tradition, to say the least. He opposes the idea of a monadic Husserlian ego with that of a "'dialectic'... [that] opens living to *différance*, constituting in the pure immanence of lived-experience the *hiatus* of indicative communication and of signification in general" (59; emphasis and punctuation modified). Since everything is enwrapped in space and time, even if in Derrida's idiosyncratic sense of what these terms mean, there is no such thing as pure interiority of the sort that the monad would require.

For Derrida, however, the greatest challenge to presence comes from language. The priority Husserl grants to spoken discourse (16) does not betoken any particular love for speech in its own right, but solely for speech insofar as it is a form of language that can almost be reduced to non-language due to its ostensible proximity to transparent intuition. It is for similar reasons that Husserl, in his "The Origin of Geometry," prefers phonetic writing on the grounds that letters of an alphabet can always remain empty of meaning in a way that Egyptian hieroglyphics or Chinese ideograms cannot³¹ (69–70). Insofar as he holds that the signifier has no life independent of the signified to which it is subordinate (15), one could say that Husserl takes language to be "a secondary

28) Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*; and Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*.

29) Leibniz, *Philosophical Writings*.

30) Aristotle, *Metaphysics*.

31) Both Husserl's essay and Derrida's famous commentary on it can be found in Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry."*

event” (59). For Derrida, however, language is central (18): a “medium of [the] play of presence and absence” (9). It follows that meaning is always part of an indicational system to such an extent that any given phenomenon can be taken with equal right as either an expression *or* an indication.

Language, in fact, is the very impossibility of making a rigorous distinction between representation and reality (42). There is nothing but the ambivalence of signs, prior to any discussion of truth or essence (21); here Derrida’s anti-realism becomes visible. It is not even possible to distinguish between sign and non-sign (86). Derrida announces his mission as that of restoring “the originality and the non-derivative character of the sign against classical metaphysics” (44). He even goes so far as to make the claim (one we will swiftly reject) that Husserl’s famous “reductions” are already entangled with indication (26). If Derrida’s claim were true, it would entail two consequences: one for the eidetic reduction and the other for the transcendental reduction. In the former case it would mean that we cannot distinguish between the essence and the accidents of the phenomenon, thereby calling the phenomenological method itself into question. After all, the entire basis of Husserl’s concrete analyses of specific phenomena is to show that one and the same entity can endure through numerous adumbrations; Derrida now challenges this on the grounds that “essence” and “accident” in any phenomenon are hopelessly intertwined. In practical terms, this would mean that we cannot assume the unity of an intentional object across its adumbrations; whatever Derrida’s intentions, this would put us back in the camp of Hume’s bundle-theory of entities, which OOO joins Husserl in rejecting. Meanwhile, the dismissal of the transcendental reduction would make it impossible to “bracket” phenomena by suspending their empirical claims and treating them simply as intentional experiences for a subject. With this, we would lose the ability to treat intentional relations as autonomous from their surroundings: good news for Derrida, to be sure, but news that is countered by the OOO analyses of art and architecture. As I have argued in separate books on these topics, art and architecture both require at least a certain degree of autonomous formalism, perhaps welcoming certain relations with their environments, but by no means all; a total Derridean breakdown of the distinction between object and context would be unable to account for the observably robust durability of artworks across changes in environment.³² These are some of the serious consequences of Derrida’s otherwise understandable turn from full self-present speech to “writing,” which he employs in a sense much broader than the activities usually recognized as writing in the literal sense. For phenomenology, and indeed for the entire tradition of “classical metaphysics,” writing must be reduced to derivative status since it is not a form of that direct proximity to the real on which Husserl insists (69).

Another point on which Derrida opposes the Husserlian commitment to direct presence of reality to the mind concerns the topic of ideality. Not only does phenomenology claim that we intend ideal objects rather than empirical ones: there is also the closely related question of universals. We do not just intend orange objects, but rather intend “orange” in many different cases; we encounter police officers in many different circumstances, even though they are distinct individuals wearing highly specific uniforms depending on their location. Derrida is quick to argue from this that “ideality not being an existent that comes down from the sky, [it] will always have its origin in the possibility of the repetition of the act that produces it” (5). While this may look like nothing more than an easy staged victory over the Platonic forms, it means more importantly that ideal objects can never be encountered once and for all in an instantaneous form of presence. Those who saw Michael Jordan in his prime might jest that he was “the Platonic archetype” of an athlete; a visit to Rio de Janeiro may convince the traveler that no greater urban beauty is possible. But such statements are never literally true: no orange object ever gets orangeness quite right, and no police officer ever quite matches the *eidos* of policeness. Instead, ideality needs to embrace a sort of temporal otherness in order to unfold its many possible repetitions. At one

32) Harman, *Art and Objects*; and Harman, *Architecture and Objects*.

point, Derrida even defines his most famous neologism, *différance*, as consisting in “the difference between ideality and non-ideality” (85). He adds as follows:

Each time that [the] value of presence is threatened, Husserl will awaken it, will recall it, will make it return to itself in the form of the *telos*, that is, in the form of the Idea in the Kantian sense. There is no *ideality* unless an Idea in the Kantian sense is at work, opening the possibility of an indefinite, the infinity of a prescribed progress, or the infinity of permitted repetitions. (8)

The Idea in the Kantian sense, of course, refers to something that we can approach only asymptotically, without ever actually reaching it.³³ Heidegger's sense of truth as *aletheia*, or uncoveredness, contains something of Kantian ideality as well, insofar as nothing can ever be fully uncovered.³⁴ Given Husserl's own admission that the direct presence of reality is something to which phenomenology can only aspire without attaining it, the Derridean insistence on mediation seems even more reasonable than it already did. The expressive sign is no longer a unique event, but can be repeated *ad infinitum* (42). This is enough for Derrida to claim that ideal being is *nothing* outside the possibility of its various empirical reappearances in the world, which does roughly the same thing to Plato that *Of Grammatology* did to Heidegger's Being, by denying the possibility of anything existing outside the empirical realm (65).

Stated differently, it could be said that “ideal objects are historical products” (13). Referring once more to Husserl on the origin of geometry, Derrida proclaims that even “the pure ideality of the geometric object” requires “securing its transmissibility by speech and then entrusting it to a writing by means of which someone will be able to restore the originative sense, that is, the act of *pure thought* which created the ideality of the sense” (70). Yet this holds not only for ideal objects in the strict sense: all representation, all consciousness, is characterized by idealities ambiguously rooted in empirical contexts (44). And given that repetition always achieves no more than a teleological or asymptotic approach to its object, there is a sense in which all consciousness refers to something fictional or imaginary (43). There is even a sense in which the very word “I,” the whole basis of direct phenomenological evidence, is itself ideal and hence necessarily fictional (81). For not only does the “I” refer to many different people, but by Husserl's own admission – as we just saw – the “I” cannot coincide with itself even in one's own case. The “I” that thinks is never quite the same as the “I” that it thinks about, given the lack of transparency with which we are condemned to shovel through our own confusing, misleading, or dead-end acts of introspection.

All of this leads to a final important point. As we have seen, it is central to Husserl's conception that “expression is ... fuller than indication” (76). This should mean that the perfect situation for us as knowers would be to have the things themselves present before us in direct intuition. What could be more “expressive” than that: more free of merely derivative indication? Yet surprisingly enough, in what Derrida calls his “most audacious exclusion,” Husserl “[puts] out of play, as ‘unessential components’ of expression, the acts of intuitive knowledge that ‘fulfill’ the meaning... . The fulfillment of the intention by an intuition is not indispensable. It belongs to the original structure of expression to be able to do without the full presence of the object aimed at in intuition” (76). Derrida asserts that this puts Husserl more on the side of non-presence than “the entire philosophical tradition” in the sense that for phenomenology, “one can speak without knowing” (76).

This is the sphere of what Husserl famously calls “empty intentions.” I can listen to an hour-long speech and understand it thoroughly, despite vividly imagining very few of the entities mentioned by the speaker and

33) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

34) Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*.

having directive intuitive access to none of them. We read Aristotle or Tacitus and largely understand their prose despite having no direct experience of most of the places and people of which they speak. I once had a phenomenology-loving friend who lived in the small town of Chimayó, New Mexico. For years I would send him letters at a specific post office box there, one that I never really bothered visualizing to myself. When I eventually paid him a visit, we stopped in front of the post office and he jokingly asked if I wanted to come inside and “fulfill an empty intention” by actually seeing the mailbox in question. The surprising point is that such fulfillments, however desirable for someone who really wants to know their subject intimately, are not actually necessary. One can amass vast reserves of knowledge on the basis of nothing but truckloads of empty intentions merely by understanding the general contours of that to which words refer. This leads Derrida to propose that perhaps meaning not only *can* occur without direct fulfillment, but that on some level this *must* be the case; that is, it could well be that meaning “essentially excludes the intuition” (78). After all, to be directly in the presence of that which we discuss usually leads to an excess or surplus of fulfillment, overpowering us with a surfeit of extraneous detail rather than letting its true meaning shine through. This is already the paradox of Husserl’s theories of adumbration and eidetic reduction; though as we have seen, the Derridean bans on identity and essence would render such theories impossible.

3. Time

One important root of non-presence that we have not discussed much so far is time, a topic important enough to merit a section of its own. Derrida leans heavily on his conception of time, which he often seems to identify with non-presence itself, as if something like “time” automatically came about as soon as presence is called into question. After all, the word “presence” quickly reminds us of “present,” and hence it comes as little surprise that Derrida shuns the idea of an isolated “now-point” that would not already be contaminated with its own past and future. As he puts it on the first page of his widely cited article “*Ousia and Gramme*”: “Beings are grasped in their Being as ‘presence’ (*Anwesenheit*); this means they are understood with regard to a definite mode of time – the ‘present’ (*Gegenwart*).”³⁵ While this intertwining of two senses of “present” – present to the mind and present in a single instant of time – no doubt figures in the history of philosophy; Derrida is wrong to identify them. Take Henri Bergson, for instance, an ideal poster child for the thesis that no such thing as a single moment of time can exist, since everything for him is continuous flux.³⁶ Yet by no means does his commitment to time as an indivisible continuum absolve Bergson of a “metaphysics of presence” in the other sense of the term: the notion that reality is directly present to us. Indeed, Bergson’s famous method of intuition suggests that the human mind has the power to grasp reality directly, even if he denies that power to standard technical-calculative rationality.³⁷

It is little noted that the same split occurs in Heidegger’s philosophy, though in the opposite direction. Namely, his entire philosophy is nothing if not a constant assault on the assumption that reality can be directly present to the mind. Even so, it does not contain anything like an account of the *flow* of time, though most readers simply assume it is implicitly there. Given that Heideggerian temporality involves a threefold structure of past, future, and their consolidation in a present, it is lazily inferred that this somehow refutes the thesis that time is made of instants, as the wrongly mocked occasionalist tradition holds. But as I have argued from

35) Derrida, “*Ousia and Gramme*,” 31.

36) For Bergson’s account of his views on time a good place to start is his debut book, Bergson, *Time and Free Will*.

37) See Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*.

my debut book forward, Heidegger's interest in time has little in common with Bergson's.³⁸ That Heidegger allows for the existence of isolated instants should be clear enough from his frequent invocation of the term *Augenblick* (moment); Derrida will be quick to accuse even Husserl of relying too heavily on this term himself (53, 56). All that Heidegger teaches is that a single instant always contains a threefold drama of (a) the situation into which we find ourselves thrown, (b) the unique way that each of us approaches this situation with a specific attitude or project, and (c) the combination of these factors in an ambivalent moment. Yet it is not the case that Heidegger is able to draw from this the Bergsonian conclusion that time is continuous and cannot be sliced up into infinitesimal pieces. If anything, Heidegger belongs instead to the occasionalist tradition, with its focus on the internal complexity of an instant.

Now, Derrida ascribes to the Heidegger of *Being and Time* – without giving a more exact citation – the view that Husserl's analyses of time in *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* are “the first, in the history of philosophy, to break with a concept of time inherited from Aristotle's *Physics* and determined on the basis of the ‘now,’ of ‘point,’ of ‘limit,’ and of ‘circle’”³⁹ (52). Let us limit ourselves here to the “now.” Derrida echoes Heidegger's verdict to the effect that Husserl grasps the Bergsonian insight that “no *now* can be isolated as an instant and pure punctuality” (52). Before going further, we should insist that Aristotle does not deserve to be Bergson's foil on this point, since his treatment of time in the *Physics* makes it perfectly clear that he views time (along with space, number, and motion) as a continuum that contains individual pieces only *potentially*, not as a collection of actual discrete units (unlike the realm of things discussed in the *Metaphysics*, which is made up of individual substances).⁴⁰ Étienne Gilson, in his Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen in 1931–1932, makes this point with especial sharpness: “M[onsieur] Bergson accuses Aristotle and his successors of having *reified* movement, and of having cut it up into a series of successive immobilities; but nothing could be more unjust, it is to saddle Aristotle with the errors of Descartes, who on this precise point is his very negation.”⁴¹ It is Descartes, with his theory of continuous creation, who has occasionalist views on the status of the “now,” not Aristotle. But returning to the main point, although Derrida seems to acknowledge Husserl's Bergsonian credentials as valid, he still charges him with excessive allegiance to “the self-identity of the now as a point, as ‘source-point’” (52). In Husserl's thought, that is to say, “despite all the complexity of its structure, temporality has a non-displaceable center, an eye or a living nucleus, and that is the punctuality of the actual now” (53).

Derrida lays this all on the table at the beginning of his fifth chapter: “the sharp point of the instant, the identity of lived-experience present to itself in the same instant bears therefore the whole weight of this demonstration. Self-presence must be produced in the undivided unity of a temporal present in order to have nothing to make known to itself by the proxy of the sign” (51). For good measure he cites a passage (Appendix 9 of *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*) where Husserl is just as hard on the unconscious as he is on indicative signs. All phases of mental life are conscious, Husserl insists: Freud is therefore in just as much jeopardy as Kant, though the psychoanalyst is never mentioned by name (54). But Derrida admits that although the punctual “now” appears as the “archi-form” in Husserl's *Ideas I*, we cannot really speak of “a simple identity of the present” in the *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (54). Yet, rather than acknowledging this as counter-evidence against his own reading – which is how I see it – Derrida treats it instead as evidence of Husserl's lack of consistency.

38) Harman, *Tool-Being*, 63 ff.

39) Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*.

40) Aristotle, *Physics*.

41) Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, 66.

This may be the moment to turn to what is actually going on in Husserl's work on internal time-consciousness, edited (ironically) by Heidegger himself. Here as elsewhere in Husserl's philosophy, he gives precision to his own theory of time by way of contrasting it with his former teacher Brentano's theory. As we have discussed, Husserl correctly sees their main difference as consisting in the fact that his own object-oriented approach differs from the content-based approach of Brentano. The latter tacitly remains within the empiricist assumption that a thing is identical with its sum total of qualities; Husserl, by contrast, treats the field of consciousness as riddled with invariant intentional objects that remain the same despite numerous shifts in their surface-features. "The Object is more than its content and other than it" writes Husserl, asking us to imagine a piece of chalk that remains the same before and after an intervening period in which our eyes were closed.⁴² In Brentano's theory of time, which is known mostly in indirect form via the writings of his students Anton Marty and Carl Stumpf, the Austrian philosopher follows the claim of Johann Friedrich Herbart and Hermann Lotze that everything that exists must exist in the present instant. Husserl rejects this assumption, which led Brentano to the view that any sensation from the past must still be with us in the present, though in some non-standard derivative form.⁴³ Stated differently, Brentano holds that temporality must be experienced as "primary content," the only mode of access he thinks we have to reality, namely, our experience of the world in a most Un-Bergsonian single temporal instant (38). Against this, Husserl leans on the authority of William Stern who denounced the "dogma of the momentariness of [the] whole of consciousness."⁴⁴ Instead, Stern favors what is often called the "specious present," by which he means a present now that *is not* instantaneous, and which many researchers have even tried to measure scientifically. For Husserl there cannot be multiple times existing at once. Yes, there is only ever the now: "two different times can never be conjoint ... their relation is a non-simultaneous one."⁴⁵ But he does not agree with Brentano that the now amounts to nothing more than an instantaneous content. Here, as always, what Husserl deploys to escape the empiricist dogma of content is the intentional *object* (along with the "act" that intends it, but our focus here is on objects). When a note is struck on a piano and slowly begins to fade, "the sound itself is the same but 'in the way that it appears,' the sound is continually different."⁴⁶ Time is not some force that encompasses objects; rather, it is the endurance of an object that allows us to experience time as something that continually shifts the object's ways of appearing. Derrida is so desperate to pillory any form of identity, even within the purely phenomenal sphere – and he accepts no other, being as little a realist as Husserl – that he cannot bring himself to confront or even clearly see Husserl's object-oriented model of time.

We know that "the principle of all principles" or "axiomatic *principium* of phenomenology" is that reality must be given as present in direct intuition. Derrida wants to parse this as a doctrine in which "the existence of psychological acts is immediately present to the subject in the present instant" (41). But we have just seen that the present for Husserl is not instantaneous; that is true of Brentano, not of Husserl, whose theory of time is governed not by instants but by intentional objects that unify otherwise rising and fading intensities of experience. Another slippage occurs when Derrida defines "being as presence" as meaning "the absolute proximity of self-identity" (85; emphasis added). Do not forget that when Derrida speaks of "absolute proximity" he means the self-*presence* in which consciousness would supposedly have unmediated access to its own reality. But to repeat, there are no grounds for contending that self-identity amounts to the same thing as self-presence. The latter could occur *at most* in the sense of thought thinking itself, a rare case at best and one that I (like

42) Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, 27.

43) *Ibid.*, 32.

44) Stern, "Psychische Präsenzzeit."

45) Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, 29.

46) *Ibid.*, 45.

Heidegger and Derrida) have argued is impossible, for the simple reason that thought is as much a mystery to itself as anything else.⁴⁷ Derrida's campaign against identity is an intriguing twist on Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, but it does not follow inevitably from the simple critique of presence, nor is it obviously a legitimate heir to what Heidegger was doing. The belief that the critique of presence entails a critique of identity is what makes Derrida suspicious of the unvarying character of the intentional object, and thereby to miss its leading role in the Husserlian theory of time. Furthermore, to speak of difference or non-presence *is not yet to speak of time*, though in Derridean circles it is often assumed that these two are the same.⁴⁸

4. The Missing Aspects of Non-Presence

The phrase "rock star" is now commonly used to refer to intellectuals with a broad and glamorous public following. Surely surely deserves this designation as much as anyone in the past century. Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and Žižek are among the few other philosophers to have reached a level of public adulation comparable to that which Derrida regularly attained during his lifetime. While it would be stuffy to dismiss such widespread appeal too quickly, it is fair to ask what it is that so interests Derrida's many readers. I think it is safe to say that most of his following *does not* consist of readers who are eager to follow in minute detail his criticisms of Husserlian phenomenology; the specific charges he lays against the role of presence in Husserl is no doubt of little intrinsic interest to most of his readership. What draws so much intensity of interest to Derrida, I believe, is the sense of many supportive readers that he brings about a complete overturning of more than two thousand years of Western intellectual history. This assumption, in turn, permits the further assumption that Derrida was not just shifting our attitude toward the discipline of ontology, or even replacing ontology itself with something more free and liberated, but that he was somehow on the verge of completely overturning a social order viewed by many intellectuals as oppressive and patriarchal. In the new post-Derridean world, perhaps "the last shall be first, and the first last."⁴⁹ As I see it, these were the often vague hopes that drove his audience from thousands to tens and then hundreds of thousands.

It would be unfair to treat this as a mere act of merchandising on Derrida's part, whatever one thinks of his academic persona. A fairer assessment would note that, just as pre-Kantian philosophers have been called "dogmatic" for believing they had attained the truth in a way superior to all earlier thinkers, philosophy now seems to take it for granted that each new philosophy must put on revolutionary airs, as if it were generating utter upheaval and laying waste to the entirety of the long tradition standing behind it. This was already true of Kant himself, with his claim to have brought about a "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy. It is true of Hegel in his view that he stands astride human history as a whole for the first and possibly final time. It seeps through the arrogant self-assessments of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, with the latter beginning his autobiographical *Ecce Homo* with Christ-like words befitting the book's title: "seeing that I must shortly approach mankind with the heaviest demand that has ever been made on it."⁵⁰ Husserl is certainly not shy in claiming that previous philosophy merely groped toward the scientifically secured direct access to things that is now attained at last in phenomenology, and his student Heidegger took on almost prophetic tones in announcing his own, opposite mission. In analytic philosophy it was possibly Wittgenstein (after the Vienna Circle) who launched the crusade of finally debunking the meaningless nonsense of metaphysics, although most analytics

47) See Harman, "Zero-Person and the Psyche."

48) I have this sense even when reading an author as talented as Hägglund, for instance.

49) *Matthew* 20:16.

50) Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*.

have long since replaced his apocalyptic tone with one that Tom Sparrow has accurately termed “affected casualness.”⁵¹ Today, Alain Badiou is perhaps the most boastful philosopher alive, one who claims direct access to truths – and revolutionary truths, moreover – that have at least partly eluded his predecessors. My point is not to insist on humility from great thinkers, which would be a petty and small-townish demand; huge ambitions will often lead to efforts at world-historic proclamations, and sometimes this is the only way for important figures to draw sufficient attention to what they are doing. My point, instead, is that there is no special reason why world-historic intellectual work should need to present itself as marking a complete temporal *caesura* with respect to all that came before; this trope is mainly a product of the world that followed Kant’s Copernican Revolution, with its historical sense and its fondness for the idea of cataclysmic change. Instead, one might imagine a world in which philosophers reassembled existing elements in a drastically new way while adding a few new ones: a world of punctuated breakthroughs rather than declarations of total inversion. St. Thomas Aquinas and Leibniz both come to mind as examples of major philosophers who proceeded in this way. Even Žižek, despite his reputation for clowning showmanship, bends over backwards to present himself as little more than someone who synthesizes Hegel and Jacques Lacan, though he is really more original than that.

All of this is to say that Derrida’s career is saturated with the rhetoric of revolution, much of it resembling the analogous rhetoric of Heidegger. Sometimes this takes the form of the assumption that *of course* we must free ourselves from how things have always been done: “this would be a classical way of proceeding” (21), Derrida intones with disdain, while cheering on Husserl as he twists free of “the security ... of traditional distinctions” (70). Deleuze often writes this way as well, presumably reacting to the cramped quarters of French academia that are not necessarily relevant in the nations of many of his readers.⁵² Derrida puts Husserl’s phrase “the things themselves” in mocking scare quotes as though it were hopelessly naïve. But the Husserlian turn to the things is nothing but a salutary attempt to turn us away from stale academic talk about problems not seen with one’s own eyes (57). More than once, Derrida claims to point the way beyond “metaphysical conceptuality” (66, 70), as if it were again a question of taking an utterly revolutionary step, although Heidegger admittedly leads the way with such claims. For Derrida as for Heidegger, we are living through the era of the “closure of metaphysics” (44), or one in which the history of presence “has closed” (87–88). When a philosopher proposes a thesis about reality, we pause for thought and retain the liberty to push back. But when they claim to speak in the voice of history itself, the clouds darken and opposition is silenced. One can always disagree with a theorist, but to object to history means to speak in the hated voice of reaction, and one’s position begins to look hopeless.

What I mean to say is that we ought to ignore all talk of “epochs of closure” and all counsel that we avoid “classical” procedures, focusing solely on what is established in *Voice and Phenomenon*, with all its insights and possible limitations. As mentioned, I find most of Derrida’s arguments against Husserl to be quite compelling. Many of these points can already be found in Heidegger’s *History of the Concept of Time*, his most sustained engagement with his teacher Husserl. Derrida does attempt a more *radical* critique of Husserl, in the sense that he not only takes on the topic of presence, but tries to dispense with identity altogether. As mentioned, I do not find this additional step convincing, and even find it somewhat paralyzing in our efforts to think in Heidegger’s wake, which is why I prefer Emmanuel Levinas over Derrida among the French Heideggerians.⁵³ But *Voice and Phenomenon* is not only an important book, but possibly the most compact presentation of the ideas of an important philosopher. Accordingly, it will be good to close with a reflection on the following three classes of ideas: (a) Derrida’s most convincing arguments against Husserlian presence, including the mental life

51) Sparrow, Personal Communication.

52) Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

53) See Harman, “Levinas and the Triple Critique of Heidegger.”

of authors, the impossibility of the auto-affection of thought, and the related impossibility of a purely expressive language; (b) Derrida's less convincing arguments, such as his remarks on ideality and time; (c) points never adequately covered by Derrida, such as Husserl's rejection of bundle-theories of objects and the inherent strength of Heidegger's notion of absence. Let us take these points one by one.

Most convincing of all is the point that the mental life of others can never be accessible to us in direct presence. Even those who reject the autonomous existence of inanimate objects are usually quick to affirm the existence of human mental life in others, and even of mental life in animals. The independence of other humans from ourselves provides a textbook example of the need to interpret by way of signs. Derrida even expands the point, convincingly enough, to any case of visibility or spatiality whatsoever, since externalities of this sort will always be saturated with partly mysterious signs (29). From here it is not difficult to conclude that self-awareness contains the same ambiguity as our relations with others, as even Husserl admits to some degree. There is no auto-affection of the self, but a rather troubled relation that each of us has with our respective selves. If needed, we could also call upon Lacanians to explain why "it is the Other's desire as such that the subject is required to recognize."⁵⁴ We often come to know ourselves better through the fleeting feedback of others than through hours of tormented introspection. All of this makes the doctrine of the auto-affection or self-presence of consciousness shaky to say the least. I similarly agree with much of what Derrida has to say about language, in particular about the intertwining of expression and indication to the point that they are difficult to distinguish. He is right to note the paradox that Husserl's ostensible privileging of direct intuition is strangely undercut by his allowance for empty intentions to do much of our cognitive work; indeed, direct intuition is often needlessly confusing, to such an extent that eidetic intuition is called upon to strip away most of our intuitively accessible information about things. Yet I reject Derrida's efforts in *Of Grammatology* to dispense with all signifieds and convert everything into signs, or at least with the anti-realist motivations that seemingly lie behind these efforts. Finally, although I would like to affirm Derrida's lesson that language is the site of a "play of presence and absence" (9), it is disturbing that his allergy to identity makes him contend simultaneously that "absence" is inevitably contaminated with the "language of metaphysics." Page 65 of "*Ousia and Gramme*" is perhaps the *locus classicus* for Derridean claims of this sort, as seen from the following passages:

That which gives us to think beyond the [Greek] closure [of presence] cannot simply be absent... . Absent, [absence] would either give us nothing to think or it would still be a negative mode of presence... . [We need] a sign of... excess [that] must be absolutely excessive as concerns presence-absence, all possible production or disappearance of beings in general, and yet, *in some manner* it must still signify it, in a manner unthinkable by metaphysics as such.⁵⁵

Here, the second sentence is an attempted justification of the first, and the third is a conclusion drawn amidst the gloom of the second. The reason the alternative to presence cannot simply be absence, it seems, is that we would then be left with negative theology and the paradox of saying something about the unsayable. But as I have said elsewhere in connection with Pseudo-Dionysius, negative theology always involves more than mere negation.⁵⁶ To fear that absence means mere silence is to surrender to Meno's Paradox, which implies that we can either speak of something directly or else we have nothing to say at all. Yet this misses the very point of *philosophia*, of being wise about something without being wise about it. Even so, in the third step above,

54) Lacan, *Écrits*, 693.

55) Derrida, "*Ousia and Gramme*," 65.

56) Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. See Harman, *Immaterialism*, 30–31..

Derrida holds out a seemingly messianic hope that maybe someday we will know how to speak about absence in a “non-metaphysical” way, as if Heidegger had not yet done enough in this direction. If Heidegger is guilty of anything in Derrida’s eyes, it would be his clinging to a notion of identity that the latter wishes to bury. But the self-identity of entities is only a problem if we identify it with the self-identity of consciousness, and there is simply no reason to do so.

As for Derrida’s less convincing points, I have mentioned his “post-metaphysical” conceptions of ideality and time. We have covered the topic of time in somewhat more detail already: contra Derrida, to oppose presence is not the same thing as to oppose the temporal present. Heidegger opposes presence but affirms the present, even if most readers of Heidegger would dispute this; Bergson gives no critique of presence in the sense of *Anwesenheit*, but fights to his last breath against isolated now-points in that sense of *Gegenwart*. The other option, of course, is to oppose presence as Heidegger does *and* the idea of now-points as Bergson (and already Aristotle) does. This is my own position, and while Derrida thinks it is his as well, he unjustifiably holds that the critique of presence must lead to a theory of global difference, and that such difference automatically yields what we call time. Both of these steps are dubious. Also unconvincing is his theory of ideality according to which the repetitions enabled/required by the ideal end up subordinating it to the distinct empirical cases in which it is found. While in one sense this might sound like a harmless re-enactment of Aristotle’s critique of Plato, the additional element in Derrida is not so harmless. For in limiting itself to a theory of signs, this idea goes beyond nominalism and reaches a form of anthropocentrism. As Levi R. Bryant asks, speaking of Derrida’s “Signature Event Context,” why is iterability limited to signs and not extended to the possibility of objects able to be the same thing in multiple times and places?⁵⁷ In a sense this would be obviously counter-productive, since OOO wants objects to have a stronger identity than mere iterability. But more importantly, the question sheds light on Derrida’s continued over-indebtedness to Kantian transcendental philosophy, in which we can ask all manner of questions about thought’s access to the world, but must remain silent about interactions between objects that happen not to be human.

We turn in closing to a pair of alternatives to presence that Derrida missed: not that he failed to observe them altogether, but that his commitment to anti-identity at all costs seems to have rendered them unavailable to him. Already we have considered the first of these, which is Husserl’s important rejection of Hume’s bundle-theory. For Husserl, unlike both Hume and Brentano, consciousness does not encounter a flat world of qualities all on the same level of content. Instead, there is a further rupture within the plane of experience between these qualities and the objects to which they belong. Hidden within this distinction there is yet another, one that we have not yet mentioned, between (a) the mere adumbrations of an intentional object that the phenomenologist is expected to scrape away through analysis, and (b) the qualities of the object that it truly needs in order to be recognized as what it is, which we might call the *eidos* of the intentional object. Derrida tacitly forbids (a) because he recognizes no enduring object beneath its adumbrations; as a result, it is impossible to imagine Derrida attempting a truly phenomenological description of anything. Meanwhile, he forbids (b) due to his *a priori* rejection of anything sounding like *eidos* or essence, no doubt because it is time to move “beyond the language of metaphysics.”

There remains the second point, the seemingly more realist one, concerning the existence of hidden backgrounds withdrawn from presence. In several past writings I have reflected on how often twentieth-century thought was fascinated with the topic of a ground hidden beneath all surface figures. The supreme philosophical example is Heidegger, with his ontological difference between hidden Being and directly accessible beings. I have also taken to grouping him with the media theorist Marshall McLuhan (who famously treats content

57) Derrida, “Signature Event Context”; and Bryant, “The Time of the Object,” 89–90.

as superficial) and the art critic Clement Greenberg (who credits modern painting with discovering its flat background medium and turning its back on narrative content).⁵⁸ Though I have previously emphasized the similarities of these three authors, their differences become more interesting in the present context, since they highlight multiple layers of a problem that Derrida excludes from consideration.

Heidegger's case is the most interesting here, if only because we know that Derrida was extremely familiar with his work. As mentioned earlier, Derrida in *Of Grammatology* ascribes some theses to Heidegger that are not Heidegger's own, though it is difficult to know whether Derrida meant this as a literal reading of Heidegger or was simply claiming that the German thinker was already on the path of deconstruction without fully realizing it. In either case, Derrida's reading cannot be affirmed. For Heidegger it is simply not the case that "being is produced as history only through the logos," nor – in my view – is this an interesting direction in which to push him. The Being addressed in *Being and Time* is unapologetically self-identical, which does not imply that it is "self-present," something that could happen only if we supposed that the entire world were saturated with self-transparent thought. But this is not Heidegger's teaching, even if one could argue that it is Husserl's and possibly that it is Hegel's. In any case, Heideggerian *Sein* is deep and hidden and accessible only by indirect means. It is also excessively unified in my view, but that is a problem for another occasion.

The case of McLuhan is different, since despite his Heideggerian-sounding claims that we cannot notice a medium without turning it into the mere content of our awareness, the medium is not "withdrawn" from us in the same way as Being. Instead, we inhabit a medium or rather multiple media at every moment of our existence. In this respect McLuhan's media are more like the "spheres" of Peter Sloterdijk's widely read trilogy: media in the form of air conditioning that we inhabit, rather than in that of a dark depth beneath our feet as happens with Heidegger.⁵⁹ There is also some overlap between McLuhan and what the late Gernot Böhme described in *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*.⁶⁰ Although active media are not directly accessible for McLuhan, they are overhead rather than underground, containing us rather than elusively hidden, and they are also multiple rather than one. Furthermore, media are eminently capable of being transformed rapidly into one another, and immediately upon their disappearance they are converted from archetypes into clichés lying before us, at least until some artist (in the widest sense of the term) manages to revive them in convincing form.⁶¹ I see no trace in Derrida of anything like the medium or atmosphere, despite the fact that these notions make a powerful contrast to presence in the "metaphysical" sense of the term.

Greenberg's flat background canvas lies somewhere between Heidegger and McLuhan. In the first place, the canvas is a limited piece of physical matter; one found in all or most paintings, but not the very stuff of everything like Heideggerian *Sein*. The canvas is also less inaccessible than Being. While Heidegger leaves it to the tortured likes of Hölderlin and Georg Trakl to gain indirect glimpses of the withdrawn, Greenberg treats awareness of the flat canvas medium more as a brilliant technical feat attained by such masters as Picasso, Miró, and Mondrian, even if he thinks it is botched by the likes of Kandinsky and Dalí. Neither is the Greenbergian canvas an atmosphere in which we dwell, nor is it quite a medium in McLuhan's sense. For whereas the purpose of a medium in McLuhan's world is to quietly sustain the content it supports, for Greenberg the canvas medium exists in order to be expressed *within* its content. Greenberg does not hold that media should enable commentaries on themselves; instead, he claims that the content of every medium is an *older* medium.⁶² Instead, he holds

58) See Harman, "The Revenge of the Surface." See also McLuhan, *Understanding Media*; and Greenberg, *Late Writings*, 28.

59) Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, 3 vols.

60) Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*.

61) McLuhan & Watson, *From Cliché to Archetype*.

62) McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*.

that to ignore the medium of painting is to lapse into *kitsch*; the only modern painting worthy of the name finds ways to refer slyly to its flat background, which is the opposite of McLuhan's procedure. Greenberg's kind of medium is not found in Derrida either for the simple reason that Derrida would never allow for a distinction between "background" and "foreground" sides of one and the same entity, which he would probably claim are hopelessly intertwined and indiscernible.

From all this, an interesting observation emerges. Although Derrida is widely associated with literary formalism and formalist criticism, even if in the guise of an in-house critic, he turns out to focus solely on the *content* of experience. He rules out any Heideggerian "deep" background because he is overly suspicious of depth. The Greenbergian medium is closed off to him because he is unable to acknowledge any rift in the heart of things, whether it be Greenberg's split between background and content, or Husserl's between objects and qualities. Finally, there is no room in Derrida for anything like an atmosphere, or for a medium in McLuhan's sense, though the reasons for this are somewhat less clear. The reason for writing an article about these missing pieces in *Voice and Phenomenon* is not to criticize Derrida for criticism's sake. My goal, instead, was to remind the reader that the "closure of metaphysics" is not the only game in town, but has left more than one avenue unexplored.

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