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**Kevin Mulligan**

**How Not To Read:  
Derrida On Husserl**

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Topos: Continental Philosophy Analysed

## 1. Promises and presence

Jacques Derrida's slim monograph *La Voix et le Phénomène (Speech and Phenomena)*<sup>i</sup> appeared in 1967. Its subject matter is indicated and expressed by its subtitle: *Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl (Introduction to the problem of Signs in Husserl's Phenomenology)*. It is of interest for at least the following reasons.

It deals with distinctions in the philosophy of language and of logic that had been developed by Husserl in the first of his *Logical Investigations*<sup>ii</sup> (1900/ 01) and have become part and parcel of exact twentieth century philosophy of language. It marks the beginning of an approach to philosophy, or at least to philosophical texts, that has been very influential. It deals with early ideas of Husserl that, according to Derrida, were incorporated into the latter's later *Transcendental Phenomenology*, which in turn is held by Derrida to be inseparable from the "philosophy of *différance*". Finally, unlike nearly all of Derrida's subsequent writings it often stays within the limits of a recognisable philosophical genre, one which involves one philosopher critically examining what another philosopher says. At least in his 1967 monograph Derrida admits to such familiar ambitions as demonstrating contradictory and untenable positions within the system of another philosopher (VP, 64; SP, 57). Although, as we shall see, his is no simple reading of Husserl.

In what follows I shall examine some of Derrida's comments on Husserl's first Investigation and argue that the French philosopher fails to make clear the relation between his own theses and suggestions and those of the Austrian philosopher he examines, in spite of the fact that he insists on using just Husserl's theses and terminology in order to formulate his own views; and that, where objections and criticisms are advanced, they are extraordinarily weak. Finally, in the most speculative part of my paper (§3) I shall suggest that a garbled version of an idea of Husserl's that is to be found in Derrida's 1967 monograph may well throw light on the "structure" of the philosophy of deconstruction and "*différance*".<sup>iii</sup>

By way of introduction some remarks on two general points are in order. First, Derrida's view that Husserl's later transcendental philosophy incorporates much of his earlier philosophy and hence, presumably, also those elements in the latter that Derrida finds lacking. Second, the constellation formed by Husserl's *Transcendental Phenomenology*, Heidegger and Derrida's own views.

Derrida's assumption that with respect to problems of signification and language "a patient reading of the *Investigations* would show the germinal structure of the whole of Husserl's thought" (VP, 1, 51; SP, 3, 47), the suggestion that the machinery of *Transcendental Phenomenology* is already implicitly present in the *Investigations*, is a strange suggestion for Derrida to make. He seems to be tempted not at all by the hypothesis that there is a "rupture", a "break", a "difference" between the earlier and the later Husserl. The fact that Husserl himself seems to have shared Derrida's view about the teleology of his development might well be adduced against the hypothesis of a break. But presumably Derrida of all people would not want his claim to rest on the word of the author. And indeed Derrida conceives of his examination of Husserl's text as providing evidence for the teleological view.

The constellation of Derrida, Heidegger and the later Husserl furnishes Derrida's monograph with some of its most important leitmotifs. Derrida himself points out that he appeals to "Heideggerian motifs in decisive places" (VP, 114; SP, 74). One such motif is Death. Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* had, amongst other things, transformed Husserl's descriptions of our mental life by giving these a much more vital colouring; in particular he had described our relation to Death as in some sense essential to our lives. Two features of this transformation which make it so difficult to follow are the use Heidegger makes of distortions of bits of ordinary German — particularly nominalisations of prepositions — and his extensive use of a large number of the obscurer philosophemes (big words) of the tradition. The fact that Husserl never indulged in either idiom, even when his philosophy had come to bear a striking resemblance to some of the positions of the German Idealists, has made it even more difficult

to see at what points, and how, Heidegger thought he was going beyond Husserl. Now part of the promise and appeal of VP is that Derrida seems to hope to bring out, without respect to one of the most developed parts of Husserl's philosophy, just what its shortcomings are in the light of Heidegger's philosophy, as suitably radicalised by Derrida himself. Thus where Heidegger puts Death in the centre of life Derrida advances a much more specific version of this claim in his attempts to display the rôle of Death in our uses of signs (VP, 60; SP, 54). Precisely because this claim is more specific than its Heideggerian ancestor it promises to be easier to get a handle on.

A second motif is Presence. It is not easy to say just what the Metaphysics of Presence is; it seems fairly clear that it is a Bad Thing; that many philosophers have suffered from it, especially Husserl; that even Heidegger was not immune but that Derrida thinks he has diagnosed it, with some help from the latter. Although a Bad Thing, it is inescapable. That is why an examination of a philosophy pervaded by the philosophy of presence in a particularly pure form, that of Husserl, promises to be illuminating. Symptoms of the Metaphysics of Presence are the tendencies to put any or all of the following notions at the centre of a philosophical system: the presence to a subject — Cartesian, empirical, transcendental — of his mental states or their contents; the presence to a subject of ideal entities such as Meanings, the presence to a subject of the temporal present in or at which his mental states or their contents or associated idealities are present to him. Where these notions are not only at the centre of a philosophical system but are also systematically interconnected, as in Husserl, then we have the disease in as pure a form as we are likely to get it. Further glimpses of the Metaphysics of Presence will be vouchsafed to the reader who follows through Derrida's detailed accounts of its ravages in Husserl's philosophy of language.

There is certainly some vague sense in which Derrida, like Quine or Wittgenstein, has been concerned to criticise a number of pervasive and traditional mentalist and Platonist assumptions. Like many other twentieth century philosophers Derrida has worried about the presuppositions behind the easy traditional talk of an idea or a representation being present to or before or in the mind. And like an even greater number of philosophers he is not prepared to accept without further ado the accounts by philosophical "Platonists" of the distinction between temporal and ideal entities and of their interrelations. But the existence of such widespread convergences at the level of concerns and conclusions is of little philosophical interest. What *would* be of philosophical interest would be an argument, a demonstration that some of Husserl's mentalist and "Platonist" views are wrong. Such an argument presupposes a clear grasp of these views and an account of the relation between the critical view and what is criticized. Let us then see whether Derrida provides such an account and supplies some such argument.

Husserl's account of a number of distinctions is, according to Derrida, undermined by his commitment to the Metaphysics of Presence. Among the distinctions in question are those:

between what is and what is not a sign,  
between linguistic signs and non-linguistic signs,  
between expression and indication,  
between what is and what is not ideal,  
between subject and object,  
between grammaticalness and non-grammaticalness,  
between pure and empirical grammaticalness,  
between pure, general grammaticalness and pure logical grammaticalness,  
between intention and intuition (VP, 113; SP, 101).

## 2. Imagination unbound

Of all the distinctions in the above list it is the third and fourth, between indication and expression and between what is and is not ideal, that most interest Derrida. And in what follows I shall concentrate on what he says about these two distinctions with only a passing glance at the last distinction on the list.

Husserl's account of the expression/indication distinction goes roughly — I omit some details — as follows. If Sam communicates to Maria that Paris is in France by asserting “Paris is in France” then, whereas what he *says* or *expresses* is that Paris is in France, what he *indicates*, manifests or intimates is that he judges that Paris is in France. Thus what is expressed is not identical with what is indicated. Sam's expressing that Paris is in France is a propositionally articulated act of meaning (*bedeuten*), which is bound up with an act of judging and which is complex: it contains acts of naming and an act of predicating. Each of these three “meaning giving acts” and each of the linguistic tokens on which they “confer” meaning instantiates (*ist ein Einzelfall von*) a ghostly “Platonic” counterpart, an ideal species.<sup>iv</sup> On Husserl's first provisional account of the distinction between expression and indication (LI I, §§1—10) the former is a relation between a cognitive subject, the sentence token he employs and the meaning acts accompanying the latter and its parts, whereas indication is a relation between these three terms and an interlocutor. On his more considered account (LII, §11, cf. §3) it is the ideal sense or meaning of the subject's meaning act that is properly said to be what is expressed or said, whereas it is the meaning act plus the associated judging that is properly said to be what is indicated. That which is indicated to an interlocutor is not present to him in the way the speaker's meaning act is given to its author.

Husserl's account, as even a cursory examination of the text or a passing acquaintance with discussions of very similar distinctions by Marty, Reinach, Bühler, Grice and most writers on speech act theory show, is at best a coarse account of an important distinction. Our summary, however, suffices in order to present and make intelligible Husserl's further attempt to distinguish the two functions of expression and indication and some of Derrida's suspicions about these.

Husserl describes the relation between what indicates and what is indicated — between smoke and fire, between your behavior and your pain, between the sentence you proffer in the assertive mode and your judging — as one which is felt to be an immediate connexion by the subject to whom something is indicated but which is nevertheless a weak relation between two temporal items since it does not instantiate any ideal law-like connexion; it corresponds to but is not identical with a probabilistic connexion. These claims allow him to sketch the following contrasts between the two functions of expressing and indicating. First, indication contrasts with the relation between asserting or supposing a premiss and

inferring from this a conclusion; for this relation between temporal episodes instantiates an ideal law-like connexion between the relevant Platonic Premiss, Conclusion and Logical Forms (LI I, §3). Second, the occurrence of a sentence together with an act of meaning, in virtue of the ideal entities they instantiate, stand in various internal and ideal semantic relations: to the state of affairs described by the sentence which, if it obtains, makes the sentence true and to the object(s) named by the meaningful uses of names in the sentence. The function of indication does not involve any such relations (LI I, §6, § 11).<sup>v</sup>

Husserl's concern in the *Logical Investigations* is to provide an analysis of meaning that is adequate to our commerce with bodies of scientific knowledge. His aim is not to provide an analysis of communication. He therefore undertakes to show that in spite of the fact that in everyday communicative uses of language indication and expression are as a matter of fact intertwined with one another, in the contexts that interest him, the solitary commerce a cognitive subject has with a scientific theory, the expressive function can occur in splendid isolation. We might put this by saying that for there to be cognitive contact with a body of truths all that is necessary is a series of mental acts. It is Husserl's account of the logical independence enjoyed by the expressive function that Derrida thinks exhibits all the marks of the *Metaphysics of Presence*.

Husserl claims (LI I, §8) that meaning acts in "solitary life", outside the context of effective indication and communication, may simply be bound up with imagined verbal sounds or imagined printed words, where these are (a) not temporal entities and (b) not to be confused with the acts of imaginative presentation of such imagined entities which, like all acts, are temporal entities. We have here, on Husserl's view, a case which is as far removed from indication as possible: since imagined words are not temporal items they cannot be the term of a relation of indication. In addition to imagined words and acts of imagination Husserl indicated a third rôle for imagination: where a person speaks to himself, he says, the subject merely imagines himself as speaking and communicating.

Derrida's deconstruction begins with Husserl's claim that the rôle of imagined words enables him to mark a difference between the two functions of expression and indication. Derrida, as we shall now see, is not so much concerned to question the intelligibility or the truth of what Husserl says about imagined words here but rather to question the distinction between perception and imagination and the expression/indication distinction Husserl builds on it.

Derrida puts his critical suggestion in the form of a question: "Does not the maintaining of this difference [between expression and indicative communication etc.] - in the history of metaphysics and for Husserl as well - answer to the obstinate desire to save presence and to reduce or derive the sign . . . ?" Just what "presence" means here is clearly explained as follows:

If communication or manifestation (*Kundgabe*) is essentially indicative, this is because we have no primordial intuition of the presence of the other's lived experience. Whenever the immediate and full presence of the signified is concealed, the signifier will be of an indicative nature. (VP, 43; SP, 40)

Sam's judgement is present "in" his mind, but is only indicated to Maria.

Derrida's argument has, as we shall see, the interesting feature that it uses Husserlian premisses against Husserl. It is because Derrida himself speaks in these terms that we may talk of an "argument" of Derrida's against Husserl: "Husserl himself gives us the means of thinking against him" (VP, 55; SP, 50; tran. modified). The argument is going to lead to the conclusion that it "is impossible in principle to rigorously distinguish" "representation and reality" (VP, 55; SP, 49). I do not know whether Derrida intends this

conclusion to be read in the full-blooded way an idealist might take it. But he certainly takes it to cover at least the three uses of a “representation”, in the sense of “imagination”, that Husserl invokes in his account of the distinction between expression and indication and that are carefully noted by Derrida. These are, to repeat: (1) imagined words, (2) the act of imagining a word, (3) the act of imagining oneself that, according to Husserl, is involved when one speaks to oneself.

The Husserlian premiss Derrida employs against Husserl is the already mentioned view that events such as uses of signs instantiate ideal entities, what Husserl calls species.

When in fact I *effectively* use words, and whether or not I do it for communicative ends (let us consider signs in general, prior to this distinction), I must from the outset operate (within) a structure of repetition.... A sign is never an event, if by event we mean an irreplaceable empirical particular. A sign which would take place but “once” would not be a sign; a purely idiomatic sign would not be a sign. A signifier (in general) must be formally recognizable in spite of, and through, the diversity of empirical characteristics which may modify it. It must remain the *same*, and be able to be repeated as such, despite and across the deformations which the empirical event necessarily makes it undergo. A phoneme or grapheme is necessarily always to some extent different each time that it is presented in an Operation or perception. But, it can function as a sign, and in general as language only if a formal identity enables it to be issued again and to be recognized. This identity is necessarily ideal. (VP, 55—56; SP, 50)

This is a fairly accurate summary of what Husserl’s “Platonism” amounts to when applied to particular uses of signs. Such temporal entities instantiate idealities, species: a “sound-pattern uttered here and now, the vanishing noise that can never recur identically” is to be sharply distinguished from the “expression *in specie*” (LI I, § 11); a type, understood in the strong ontological sense in which Husserl understands types, is to be sharply distinguished from its tokens. (Derrida’s qualification in the passage just quoted, “to some extent”, suggests that he may not think that this distinction is as sharp as Husserl takes it to be; but no reasons are given for this strange qualification.)

Of course Husserl also thinks that each of the mental events that, on his account of signs, are involved in their use,

- acts of judging or supposing;
- the “matters” or token contents of all such acts and all their parts i.e. meaning acts of stating, naming and predicating;
- the perception of a sign;

also instantiate idealities.

From his unproblematic summary of a relatively familiar line of thought Derrida draws a breathtaking conclusion. It is already announced in a line omitted from the passage above: “... I must from the outset operate (within) a structure of repetition *whose basic element can only be representative*” (my emphasis). It is stated clearly in the continuation of the passage just quoted:

This identity is necessarily ideal. It thus necessarily implies representation: as *Vorstellung*, the locus of ideality in general, as *Vergegenwärtigung*, the possibility of reproductive repetition in general, and as *Repräsentation*, insofar as each signifying event is a substitute (for the signified as well as for the ideal form of the signifier). (VP, 156; SP, 50)

This *implication* is certainly not a Husserlian thesis. Not — with two trivial exceptions — in any of the 13 different senses of *Vorstellung* distinguished by Husserl (LI V, §44). And I can find no trace of an argument for any of its non-trivial interpretations. Is what is said to be necessarily implied by the identity of a sign species, representation, itself temporal, ideal or neither? I shall consider these possible

“readings”.

Let us assume that there are “idealities”, Husserlian species. What could it mean to assert that a species implies representation? Many idealities’ only connexion with representation is that they can be represented:

Meanings, we said, constitute a *class* of “universal” objects or species. Each species, if we wish to speak of it, presupposes a meaning in which it is presented (*vorgestellt*), and this meaning is itself a species. But the meaning in which an object is thought, and its object, the species itself, are not one and the same. Just as in the sphere of individuals, we distinguish between Bismarck himself and presentations of him, e.g. *Bismarck — the greatest of Germans* etc., so also, in the field of species, we distinguish between, e.g., the number 4 itself and the presentations, i.e., meanings, which have 4 as their object, as, e.g., *the number 4 the second even number in the number-series* etc. (LI I, §33).

There is a sense of *Vorstellung* in which one important class of idealities is a class of *Vorstellungen*. The well-known act-content ambiguity of *Vorstellung* allows Husserl to call propositionally articulated meaning species propositional *Vorstellungen* and their nominal components nominal *Vorstellungen* (LI V, §45). But this purely terminological, and hence trivial point cannot be what Derrida has in mind, since the main target of his argument is sign species or idealities and not meaning species. Nevertheless it will help us to understand Derrida’s text if from now on we impute to him a tacit restriction of the scope of “idealities” to sign species and, in certain cases, to meaning species.

Is the claim, then, that verbal species or types are instantiated, when they are instantiated by particular *Vorstellungen* and/or *Vergegenwärtigungen*? Not on Husserl’s view; such mental episodes instantiate their own species: types of act quality and act matter.

There is a second trivial sense in which it might plausibly be claimed that the ideal identity of a sign implies representation and this sense provides us with one of the two most plausible interpretations of what Derrida wants to say. If a sign species is instantiated it may plausibly be claimed that the token sign must be perceived, and a perception is one of the many things that can be called a *Vorstellung*. As Derrida puts it, a sign’s formal identity “enables it to be issued again and to be recognized” (VP, 56; SP, 50). But if Derrida’s conclusion is that a sign species necessarily implies such perceptions then he needs the thesis that sign species must be instantiated. This point is not implausible. Consider the difference between sign species and meaning species, from the point of view of a philosophy like Husserl’s. Husserl, like Frege, is prepared to talk of “countless meanings [Frege: senses] which, in the common relative sense of the word [meaning *of*] are merely possible ones, since they are never expressed, and since they can, owing to the limits of man’s cognitive powers, never be expressed” (LI I, §35). Now a similar claim about sign species and their instantiations is implausible even for an extreme Platonist. And indeed Husserl came to recognize this point by introducing a distinction between “bound idealities”, such as word-types, and idealities that are not bound to the real world, such as numbers.<sup>vi</sup>

Let us then assume that sign species must be instantiated and that their instances are the object of perceptual presentations. If Derrida is right in saying that “a sign which would take place but ‘once’ would not be a sign” (and I think he is; cf. “a rule cannot be obeyed only once”), a sign species must be instantiated at least twice. Do these claims provide the materials that Derrida takes to undermine Husserl’s distinction between expression and indication? Not yet. We must bear in mind Derrida’s discovery of what is, I think, a genuine difficulty within Husserl’s system. We have seen that in solitary expression Husserl thinks that both the acts of imagining words and the objects of these acts, imagined words, play a rôle. On Husserl’s full account we must add to these what he calls “images” (*Phantasmen*, LI V, §44). This yields, if nothing else, a

complete parallel between the structures of perceptual and imaginative presentations of signs: to the act of seeing there corresponds the act of imagining; to the visual sensations of a sign there correspond visual images, but neither the sensations nor the images are the objects of the acts they belong to; to the seen sign there corresponds the imagined sign. The glaring difficulty with this view is that, although we may feel we understand what it is for the token sign, which is seen, to instantiate a sign species, it is by no means clear what Husserl's view of the relation between imagined signs and sign species could or should be.

Derrida himself indicates, rather than expresses, this difficulty. But he does usefully point out how Husserl's references to imagination come to be increasingly important in his later philosophy (VP, 49; SP, 44) with its baroque multiplication of types of access to ideal entities; and he notes Husserl's claim, it is no more, that the being of what is ideal is to be distinguished from the being-thought of which characterizes the fictitious (LI II, §8; VP, 59; SP, 53). More important for our purposes is that Derrida clearly thinks that his qualified endorsement of Husserl's account of idealities is going to enable him to undermine the distinctions between imaginative presentations and perceptual presentations and between words and imagined words and so the distinction between expression and indication. We should therefore take Derrida's conclusion that the ideal identity of the sign necessarily implies representations to mean that *a sign species is necessarily instantiated and is instantiated by acts that involve either perception or imagination* (or reproduction, a case I shall ignore in what follows). From this Derrida draws a further conclusion:

... if it is admitted that, as we have tried to show, every sign whatever is of an originally repetitive structure, the general distinction between the fictitious and effective usages of the sign is threatened. *The sign is originally wrought [travaillé] by fiction.* (VP, 63; SP, 56)

By reason of the primordially repetitive structure of signs in general there is every likelihood that "effective" language is just as imaginary as imaginary speech and that imaginary speech is just as effective as effective speech. (VP, 56; SP 51)

In other words, the acts of perception and imagination that are instantiated when signs are used are not pure, but, we may say, hybrid.

Now the view that "perception" and "imagination" are not univocal, do not correspond to two distinct uniform types of mental episode or state, the view that there are complicated overlapping and difficult to survey relations between such episodes and the view that such episodes can only be individuated in terms of non-mental facts (not to mention the view that there are no such episodes) are not unfamiliar. And there are a number of familiar ways of arriving at these conclusions. But Derrida, on the interpretation of his view that we are considering, seems to want to get to an even stronger conclusion, to wit, that the distinction between perceptual presentations and imaginative presentations, and presumably the distinction between positing and non-positing acts of which it is a special case, as well as the distinction between an imagined word and a perceived word, are undermined by the Husserlian thesis that token signs and perceptions are instances of repeatable species. This is certainly a novel argument.

Consider its application to the following case. The proposition that Paris is in France can, according to both Husserl and Derrida, be repeated or multiply instantiated. To be exact, both the verbal species and the corresponding propositional meaning have this property. On Derrida's view, this property would imply that there is no sharp difference between judging that Paris is in France, on the one hand, and supposing that Paris is in France, on the other hand. Judging and judgement, we ought rather to conclude, are "wrought" by supposing and supposition.

One of the obstacles to understanding and evaluating such claims is the fact that Derrida does not address directly Husserl's claim that token perceivings, imaginings, etc., are *themselves* instances of species. Husserl thinks that there are certain interrelations between such species, each of which Derrida seems to want to deny. First, the incompatibility between simultaneously seeing and imagining *a* (cf. seeing and admiring *a*; LI V, §42). Secondly, the "correspondence" between seeing *a* and imagining *a*, or between judging that *p* and supposing that *p*: the act of judging that *p can* be transformed into an act of supposing that *p* in virtue of an "ideal possibility" (LI V, §38)<sup>vii</sup>. It would therefore have been good to know what Derrida thinks about the premises on which Husserl relies to make these specific claims, namely that seeings, rememberings, imaginings themselves instantiate different idealities or species.

There are various reasons other than mere charity<sup>viii</sup> for thinking that Derrida also has in mind a second argument. At many places he seems to be suggesting the view that at least *some idealities are representative and hence partly imaginative*, as distinct from the view that sign species must be instantiated by hybrid acts. On this second interpretation, it would also follow that where such hybrid species are instantiated their instantiations would also be hybrid. This second interpretation of what Derrida's argument amounts to provide one possible interpretation of the last sentence in the last text quoted: the sign, understood now not as particular sign uses but as the sign species, is originally wrought by fiction. One version of this view is presented in the following passage:

But the primordial structure of repetition that we just evoked for signs must govern all acts of signification. The subject cannot speak without giving himself a representation of his speaking, and this is no accident. We can no more imagine effective speech without there being self-representation than we can imagine a representation of speech without there being effective speech. This representativity may no doubt be modified, complicated, and be reflected in the primary modes that are studied by the linguist, the semiologist, the psychologist, the theoretician of literature or art, or even the philosopher. They may be quite primary, but they all suppose the primordial unity of speech and the representation of speech. Speech represents itself; it is its representation. Even better, speech is *the* representation of itself. (VP, 64; SP, 57)

Derrida's point here seems to be not (not only?) the traditional mentalist thesis that a subject is aware of (has a *Vorstellung* of) the states he is in — a thesis that would not apply to speech anyway. The sentence "The subject cannot speak without giving himself a representation of his speaking" ("Le sujet ne peut parler sans s'en donner la représentation") might seem to imply the view condemned by Husserl at LI, §34: "If e.g. we make a statement, we judge about the thing it concerns, and not about the statement's meaning". Neither the token meaning act nor the species it exemplifies, nor by analogy, the token sentence nor the sign species it exemplifies are "given" to the subject. But Derrida's view is not the view condemned by Husserl here but rather that the sign species and the meaning species are themselves representations. Sign and meaning idealities, which are repeatable, "command" the totality of their actual and possible instantiations and so represent these. Is this anything more than a merely verbal stipulation? Is Derrida here proposing anything more than a simple change of terminology? What good reason could he have for describing the venerable relation of instantiation/repetition between an ideality and its instances as a relation of "representation"? Presumably some similarity between this new use of "representation" and the other more familiar uses of the same term to be found, for example, in Husserl. But although Derrida tells us that "the *re-* of this re-representation does not signify the simple — repetitive or reflexive — reduplication that *befalls* a simple presence (which is what the word *presentation* has always meant)" (VP, 64; SP, 57), he unfortunately provides no positive account of just what is gained by talking here of "representation".

What makes this especially regrettable is that Derrida's argument is explicitly presented by him in Husserlian terms and as being faithful to what Husserl says about expression and as going beyond Husserl only with respect to indication and the "form" of which both are supposed to be — *pace* Husserl — special cases: "But it is only expression and not signification in general that Husserl wants to describe as belonging to the order of

representation as *Vorstellung*” (VP, 56; SP, 50). Husserl, however, does *not* want to describe sign species, as opposed to meaning species, as belonging to the order of representation as *Vorstellung*, but as belonging to the order of what is ideal and so, like any object, to the order of what *can* be the object of a *Vorstellung*. So either Derrida has misread Husserl or he fails to formulate any revisionary thesis in the only vocabulary he has allowed himself, or both. And if, as I suggest, he has simply baptised the relation of instantiation “representation” then this purely verbal move has the function of allowing him to find representation wherever there are idealities and their instances, that is to say, on his Husserlian premisses, everywhere.

### 3. A modal tour de passe-passe as a passe-partout

In order to understand more fully just what Derrida takes “idealities” to be and how he takes himself to have deconstructed the familiar, traditional conceptions thereof we must look more closely at what he says about “possibility” and “structure”. I shall suggest that a rather curious transformation of a Husserlian concept of possibility is used by Derrida to flesh out an even more mysterious notion of structure which is employed at numerous places in Derrida’s writings.

We have already seen how Derrida frequently talks of idealities as structures: of the “representative structure” which is meaning, of “the primordially repetitive structure of signs” (VP, 56; SP, 51). Another very typical passage is “It belongs to the original structure of expression to be able to dispense with the full presence of the object aimed at by intuition” (VP, 100; SP, 90).

It will help to understand what Derrida’s use of “structure” amounts to if we note how it differs from Husserl’s use of the concept. Husserl’s concept can be described as follows: a structure or “structural law” is a relation of dependence, for example between the species Emotion and the species Cognitive State, or between the Species Syncategorematic Expression and the Species Categorematic Expression. For possible instances of the first species in each couple depend on, cannot exist without, instances of the second species. Derrida’s use of “structure” is much more ambitious and resembles in this point the inflationary use of the concept by Parisian (as opposed to Genevan or Russian) structuralists. Derrida does of course, like Husserl, want to talk of possible instances of an ideal structure (VP, 58; SP, 52). But he also wants to say something else, a supplement which emerges most clearly in his discussion of Husserl’s views on perceptual and indexical statements.

Derrida criticises Husserl’s view (LI 1, § 14, VI, §§1—6, the ancestor of a view much discussed of late, that my interlocutor must have sensory contact with what I refer to if he is to grasp what I say when I say “That’s a blackbird” or “I am sad”. Unfortunately he fails to understand a crucial feature of Husserl’s argument: the distinction between the singular proposition understood by my interlocutor when he sees what “that” refers to and the merely particular proposition that is understood by my interlocutor when he hears the sentence but does not see the blackbird (there is a blackbird here, there is a blackbird the speaker is referring to, etc.; cf. LI VI, §5). But what I should like to draw attention to in Derrida’s discussion is not this failure but rather the “logic” (in the Parisian sense) of his view of “structure” which is apparent in passages like the following:

Let us consider the extreme case of a “statement about perception”. Let us suppose that it is produced at the very moment of the perceptual intuition: I say, “I see a particular person by the window” while I really do see him. It is structurally implied in my performance that the content of this expression is ideal and that its unity is

not impaired by the absence of perception here and now.

So far, so Husserlian: there is a propositional species instantiated by the speaker's act, whose unity is not impaired by the absence of perception. But Derrida continues: "Whoever hears this proposition, whether he is next to me or infinitely removed in space and time, should, by right, understand what I mean to say (entends dire)". This is not quite right, as I have suggested, but pales besides what comes next:

Since this possibility is constitutive of the possibility of speech, it should structure the very act of the person who speaks while perceiving. My nonperception, nonintuition, my *hic et nunc* absence are expressed by the very thing that I say, by *that* which I say and *because* I say it. This structure will never be able to form an "intimately blended unity" with intuition. The absence of intuition — and therefore of the subject of the intuition — is not only *tolerated* by speech; it is *required* by the general structure of signification, when considered *in itself*. It is radically requisite: the total absence of the subject and object of a statement — the death of the writer or/and the disappearance of the objects he was able to describe — does not prevent a text from meaning something. (VP, 103—104; SP 92—93; tran. modified)

An ideal structure, then, *can* be instantiated and any such instantiation *can* occur in radically different types of context. A perfectly plausible claim for a Platonist to make. But a peculiar twist is given to this claim, that is already announced in the peculiar phrase "My non-perception ... my *hic et nunc* absence *are expressed* [my emphasis] by the very thing that I say", and fully present in the following passage:

Just as I need not perceive in order to understand a statement about perception, so there is no need to intuit the object *I* in order to understand the word *I*. The possibility of this nonintuition constitutes the *Bedeutung* as such, the *normal Bedeutung* as such. When the word *I* appears, the ideality of its *Bedeutung*, inasmuch as it is distinct from its "object", puts us in what Husserl describes as an abnormal situation — just as if *I* were written by someone unknown. This alone enables us to account for the fact that we understand the word *I* not only when its "author" is unknown but when he is quite fictitious. And when he is dead. The ideality of the *Bedeutung* here has by virtue of its structure the value of a testament. And just as the import of the statement about perception did not depend on there being actual or even possible perception, so also the signifying function of the *I* does not depend on the life of the speaking subject. Whether or not perception accompanies the statement about perception, whether or not life as self-presence accompanies the uttering of the *I*, is quite indifferent with regard to the functioning of meaning. My death is structurally necessary to the pronouncing of the *I*. (VP, 107—108; SP, 96)

The extra modal supplement Derrida here adds to talk of possible instances of a species and the possible circumstances of such instances is the idea that all these possibilities are "structurally necessary" to the ideality of the *Bedeutung* of "I" as they are to all meaning and sign species. We shall look in a minute at further evidence for this reading of Derrida. But first a word about the particular circumstance that so fascinates our philosopher. Derrida returns again and again to the link between his concept of structure and death:

The relationship with *my death* (my disappearance in general) thus lurks in this [Husserl's] determination of being as presence, ideality, the absolute possibility of repetition. The possibility of the sign is this relationship with death. The determination and elimination of the sign in metaphysics is the dissimulation of this relationship with death, which yet produced signification. (VP, 60; SP, 54)

It is hard to see why death alone should enjoy this privilege. After all, one of the ways in which death can occur is through the absence of oxygen or the presence of poison. So the possibility of the sign is this relationship with oxygen and poison. And it seems likely that signs can be used by human brains and by brains made of plastic. So the possibility of the sign is also this relationship with plastic.

On occasions Derrida mentions a "psychologistic" version of the relation between an ideal structure and death: "If the possibility of my disappearance in general must somehow be *experienced* [my emphasis] in order for a relationship with presence in general to be instituted . . ." (VP, 60; SP, 54). This is a special case of the view mentioned above, according to which, if

a subject's acts instantiate an ideality, then he is aware of it, has a representation of it (and of its possible instantiations, and their contexts?). As we noted above, Husserl criticises this view and it seems unlikely that it represents Derrida's considered view. In any case Husserl had already presented the form of the obvious naive objection to such a claim. In a 1903 review discussion of the idiosyncratic neo-Kantian Julius Bergmann and his view that every object of thought is thought of as belonging to the world and every thought is inseparable from a thought of the ego Husserl wrote: "If one takes the case of a presentation of the number pi I find it impossible to introduce into it the thoughts of the world and of the ego without changing the sense of the presentation" (Husserl, 1979, 177-178). Much the same might be said of the world and death, as described by Derrida and Heidegger in their "psychologistic" moments.

Conversely, there is an obvious objection of the same sort to the "psychologistic" reading of "We can no more imagine effective speech without there being self-representation than we can imagine a representation of speech without there being effective speech". If the first part of this claim is an allusion to Husserl's claim that when speaking to oneself one can at most imagine that one is speaking to oneself, then on Derrida's (and, incidentally, Brentano's) view it is inconceivable that Sam should effectively communicate to Maria that Paris is in France without imagining himself (VP, 64; SP, 57). But surely this *is* conceivable.

Let us now go back to Derrida's view about what a structure is. An ideal structure, we said, *can* be instantiated and any such instantiation *can* occur in radically different types of circumstance. This observation *could* have led to the formulation of a number of nominalist doubts about Husserlian "idealities", but, despite some suggestions to the effect that the species/instance distinction is not as sharp as Husserl imagines, this is not the route Derrida takes. On the contrary, he is keen to insist on the ideal character of his "structures" and to give them a special twist. As we have seen, the Derridean twist is the claim that the different possible contexts in which the possible instantiations of an ideality or structure can occur stand in some interesting philosophical relation to this ideality or structure.<sup>x</sup> Expression? Representation? Determination? Prescription? When Derrida addresses this question, as in the discussion which attempts to do for Austin's distinction between felicitous and infelicitous speech acts what had already been done to Husserl's expression/indication distinction,<sup>x</sup> he writes:

To be what it is, all writing must, therefore, be capable of functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined receiver in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence, it is a rupture in presence, the "death" or the possibility of the "death" of the receiver *inscribed in the structure of the mark*. (SEC, 375, tran. 180; my emphasis)

Under pressure from Searle to formulate his modal commitments a little more clearly, Derrida returns to just this formulation:

I repeat, therefore, since it can never be repeated too often: if one admits that writing (and the mark in general) *must be able* to function in the absence of the sender, the receiver, the context of production etc., that implies that this power, this *being able*, this possibility is *always* inscribed, hence "necessarily" inscribed as *possibility* in the functioning or the functional structure of the mark. Once the mark *is able* to function, once it is possible for it to function in case of an absence etc., it follows that this possibility is a *necessary* part of its structure, that the latter must *necessarily be such that* this functioning is possible; and hence, that this must be taken into account in any attempt to analyze or to describe, in terms of necessary laws, such a structure. Even if it is sometimes the case that the mark, in fact, functions *in-the-presence-of*, this does not change the structural law in the slightest.... (Derrida, 1977, 184)

From this we can, I think, conclude that an ideality for Derrida is a structure which is complex because it has parts and that things are inscribed in it, hence that it is representative (cf. §2 above). Unfortunately Derrida tells us nothing about how to read what is inscribed in these structures. Perhaps, hidden up his sleeve, he has a theory of *de re* (*de* events and *de*

idealities) modality that would reproduce certain key features of S5. But this is unlikely, in spite of Derrida's numerous jumps from possibilities to the necessity that they are possible, since if anything is clear about the complexity of Derridean structures it is that their parts are not related by any formal concepts (conjunction, disjunction, implication, etc.; cf. note 5) as are the parts of what Husserl called a "structural law" (a concept Derrida repeats in the above passage). For the wide notion of a sign species is not supposed to be confused with the limited case which is expression, the "locus" of logical form.

Perhaps the best recipe for obtaining a Derridean structure is this: take a sign token; imagine some other instances of the sign species of which the first token is an instance, in contexts or circumstances as heterogenous or melodramatic as you like. Take the species or types of which these circumstances are instances and mix these thoroughly with the original sign species. The resulting ideal mixed species is now such as to have the following magical properties: it is active, efficient (VP, 108; SP, 96); its instantiations are and are not specifically different from another; each is wrought, worked over (*travaillé*) by the others. Baptise the relation between the: mixed species and its instantiations, "expression" or "representation...", "inscription of".

I put forward this "rational reconstruction", in the absence of any credible alternative, as an inference from Derrida's own texts to the best explanation. As a reconstruction it has the advantage of predicting all the features of Derrida's own readings of philosophical and literary texts, with the exception of their high entertainment value. It also has the merit of bringing out Derrida's relation to Husserl.

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## Notes

\* This paper is a translation of a part of 'La Nullité de l'herméneutique', read at the 1989 Brussels colloquium on 'Nihilisme et Herméneutique'.

i

Referred to henceforth as "VP" and "SP" followed by the page reference.

ii Referred to henceforth as "LI" with references to the relevant Investigation and section; thus "LI I, §3" refers to the first Investigation, section 3.

iii It is a strange fact that Derrida's reading of Husserl has rarely been criticised by Phenomenologists, indeed rarely examined at all in spite of its role and ramifications in Derrida's thought. But this is not terribly surprising. Phenomenologists tend only to read the text Derrida deconstructs, the first of Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, for clues to Husserl's later Transcendental Eology, or for clues to Heidegger.

iv Husserl himself is unhappy with the attribute "Platonic.... Anyone worried by the epithet can substitute for it "Plhatonic" and bear in mind that the "h" is not pronounced.

v This implies that expression, not indication, is the home of formal logical concepts such as the connectives. Derrida uses the notion of form in a different sense (VP, 24; SP, 23) and does not directly address this point (but cf. VP, 111; SP, 99).

vi This is an example of a development in Husserl's thought well described by Derrida (e.g. at VP, 6, 26; SP, 7, 25).

vii The first point is also made by Sartre and Wittgenstein. The modal notion employed in the second point is employed by Derrida, as we shall see in §3.

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<sup>viii</sup> Texts such as those of Derrida do of course present the reader concerned to apply principles of charity with a problem.

<sup>ix</sup> . Derrida's merry way with modal concepts is one of the most striking features of his texts. I am grateful to both Anne Reboul and Jacques Bouveresse for discussions of their independent and still unpublished analyses of this phenomenon.

<sup>x</sup> Derrida, 1972, 'Signature, Evènement, Contexte', henceforth "SEC".

11 This transition suggests that Derrida wishes to modify not only Husserl's notion of ideality, but also his and most traditional notions of necessity.

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*Dept. of Philosophy*  
*University of Geneva*  
*CH-1211 Geneva, Switzerland*