Derrida’s intervention in phenomenology

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Abstract: Derrida shows that each text is inescapably haunted by its double, and hence deconstruction becomes a double science and a double-writing, in which the ghost of a text returns to haunt it through aporia and the delimitation of limit. Truth is thus neither transcendental nor empirical, but quasi-transcendental as the transcendental is nothing outside the empirical and vice versa. Truth is differance, or the difference between the transcendental and empirical rather than belonging to either side as the transcendental is simultaneously the empirical, related in paradoxical simultaneous similarity and difference, identity and non-identity. The transcendental is and is not the empirical, their difference translates into a sameness, as the transcendental and empirical are separated by a difference which is not a difference, differance. Transcendental-empirical distinction is an illusion, hence the divide of phenomenology into strict idealism or empiricism is based upon an aporia because these exist only in relation to each other through iterability and differance. This paper thus demonstrates that Derrida saves phenomenology by addressing the problem of transcendental and empirical genesis through his concepts of differance, iterability and the quasi-transcendental.

In this paper I will review Derrida’s intervention in phenomenology. I will describe Derrida’s intervention as the location of truth in that which is neither transcendental nor empirical, but quasi-transcendental, the paradoxical space between that enables the thinking of both. As Husserl
requires the exclusion of the empirical and Heidegger, Blanchot, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur require the exclusion of the transcendental, or the transcendental to be accounted for on empirical grounds, for their philosophies to stand, transcendental and empirical require each other to determine phenomenology through differance and iterability. Phenomenology is determined rather by the quasi-transcendental, that which is neither transcendental nor empirical but the a priori difference between that allows the thinking of both.

Phenomenology has become a science of knowledge divided against itself. Originally founded by Husserl on the doctrine of intentionality to return to the things themselves as a purer science of knowledge that was presuppositionless and based on strict observation of phenomena, phenomenology has witnessed a split into opposing camps of transcendental idealism espoused by Husserl and an empirical psychology espoused by his followers and detractors, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Ricoeur. Subsequently phenomenology has seen a split along the lines of idealism and post-metaphysics, not unlike the split in metaphysics between idealism and realism. Has phenomenology broken away from metaphysics only to fall into a similar paradox and division? The debate has implications for a conception of truth: which version of phenomenology is a more accurate reading of the thing and the event?

An aporia or impasse has occurred in the development of phenomenology – in the debate between transcendental idealism and empirical psychology, or the radical empiricism of Levinas, Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty. The question arises as to which can claim to be a more rigorous and faithful reading of phenomena. The act of bracketing, which takes place in Husserl’s phenomenology as an exclusion of the empirical
witnesses a reversal in Heidegger’s phenomenology. This is because bracketing radicalizes intentionality, to return to the anthropological and situated realm of Being. Likewise, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur and Blanchot espouse a negative phenomenology or radical empiricism. What both camps share is a form of purist idealism—be this transcendental idealism or empirical idealism. This paper will examine this tension in phenomenology as an aporia that Derrida’s post-phenomenology addresses. Derrida’s post-phenomenology recognized the paradoxical division that had taken place in phenomenology and tries to perform a tracing to the roots of both transcendental idealism and empirical psychology or radical empiricism by examining the a priori conditions that structure both versions of phenomenology. This paper will examine whether Derrida’s intervention and negotiation of the debate is convincing and whether it accounts for the meta-conditions that produce the structurality of structure in the phenomenology espoused by both camps.

Derrida locates the aporia at the center of phenomenology: that its distinctions, such as those between the transcendental and empirical, and between metaphysics and non-metaphysics or representational thinking and post-representational thinking, translate into paradoxical similarities. This happens because in his readings the transcendental turns out to be nothing outside the empirical. Non-metaphysics is repetition of metaphysics and representational thinking and post-representational thinking retain resemblances to each other. Paradoxically, the distinctions that hold at the heart of phenomenology are repetitions of the same, governed by the principle of iterability. That which makes the distinctions impossible is precisely what makes them possible: differance. This is because expression and indication translate as the same, the transcendental and empirical
translate as the same, metaphysics and non-metaphysics translates as the same, as translates representational and post-representational thinking. The difference or differance between these phenomenological distinctions translate into a distinction which is paradoxically a sameness, a distinction that differentiates, and distinguishes, nothing. Derrida thus discovers the aporia that the distinctions that hold in phenomenology translate into a paradoxical sameness, or differance, which separates and distinguishes nothing.

In this section I will be examining Geoffrey Bennington’s reading of deconstruction and the quasi-transcendental. Bennington’s lucid and clarifying work on the quasi-transcendental will form the foundations of my paper. I extend Bennington’s reading of the quasi-transcendental to readings of phenomenology. Bennington’s readings on the quasi-transcendental are cogent as they define the fundamental conditions of possibility for reading metaphysics: excluded and a priori difference is necessary to think the economy of metaphysics. Bennington locates excluded difference or differance: the quasi-transcendental as the condition of possibility for metaphysics, the third sphere of excluded difference, that which is neither transcendental nor empirical but between, as the founding condition that determines metaphysics. Bennington defines the quasi-transcendental as an excluded difference which structures the very possibility of reading: “The reading work carried out by Derrida consists in the location of these excluded terms or these remains that command the excluding discourse-supplement (masturbation or writing) in Rousseau and the index in Husserl, the parergon or vomit in Kant.”

Bennington defines Derrida’s work as a work of reading. This work of reading refers to the active act of elucidation and illumination, to understand and shed light on a written text. In the context of Derrida’s work, the work of reading is the elucidating of certain oppositional structures in philosophy which are informed by a double bind or shadow, which Derrida’s work of reading locates as a binary structure that suppresses or relegates as secondary one element. This element in fact, governs and is crucial to informing the primary structure as it forms its basis and functions as its conditionality for understanding the primary structure.

Read in this context, the transcendental, which has historically been read as the source of the empirical, must be understood as that which is simultaneously conditioned by the empirical through the dynamic relation of iterability, differance and repetition. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that Derrida is simply locating oppositional structures only to reverse them, as his concern is to elucidate the fact that these exist in a dynamic relation of differance and iterability, transcendental does not exist outside the empirical just as the empirical is but the trace of the transcendental and cannot function outside its conditioning. The transcendental and empirical do not exist outside the structure of repetition and differance. It is the repeatability of the mark, its ability to differ from itself, which defines the structure of transcendental and empirical interaction, or differance. In other words, it is transcendental-empirical difference, differance, the trace or the quasi-transcendental, which determines the structure of metaphysical production and functioning through the action of iterability, or repetition with a difference. It is this system of differences, that relays signifier to signifier, in an infinite chain of supplements, that determines metaphysics as arche-writing.
Deconstruction according to Bennington is thus the location of the supplementary as that which is the conditionality of the primary as it forms the oppositional structure which governs and conditions the primary. Derrida’s work of reading elucidates such oppositional structures or binaries to demonstrate that it is the fundamental principle of repetition that produces metaphysical structures. Transcendental and empirical only exist in a dynamic relation of repetition with a difference, it is not conceivable for the transcendental to exist without the empirical or the empirical to exist without the transcendental. In Husserl for instance, expression is not separable from indication as a sign by its very nature refers to something else and hence no exclusive expression without indication exists as an ideal sign has to be indicated in order to be communicated even in solitary mental life. In other instances, Husserl reduces metaphysics to mind and Merleau-Ponty reduces metaphysics to body while Derrida demonstrates that these exist only in and through each other, mind and body exist in a state of dynamic interaction, iterability and differance. Mind is not reducible to body, just as body is not reducible to mind. These exist only in dynamic interaction as the transcendental and empirical exist only in a state of repetition with a difference or iterability. Mind is mediated only through body and vice versa and hence it is absurd to conceive body without mind or mind without body, they exist in a dynamic relation of interdependency, iterability and differance. Likewise, love is only experienced through concretely manifested acts of love just as physical acts of love without the transcendental spiritual experience of love does not mean anything. God exists only in and through differance, through history and through Christ, just as these mean nothing without the founding principle of God.
In other words, the negative determines the positive just as the positive determines the negative. Derrida’s argument, according to Bennington, is that the excluded terms are not secondary but essential to determining the primary structures. The “supplement in Rousseau, the index in Husserl, the parergon or vomit in Kant” are all terms that have been relegated to a secondary place in philosophy but which determine the positive as a condition of possibility in Derrida’s reading, functioning as the index, differance, or quasi-transcendental which determines both positive and negative. It is transcendental empirical difference, the quasi-transcendental, or differance that determines both transcendental and empirical and upholds metaphysics. Derrida’s act of reading elucidates that such pairings are interdependent and not exclusive to each other, existing in and through each other with the structure of repetition, and that oppositional structures thrive on their dynamic pairing and oppositionality in order to function. In other words as will be demonstrated by this paper, transcendental is not conceivable without the empirical and vice versa, self is not conceivable without the other and vice versa, metaphysics is simultaneously determined by non-metaphysics. Metaphysics is thus not determined by the transcendental but the difference between the transcendental, differance or the quasi-transcendental.

Truth will be demonstrated by this paper to be neither transcendental nor empirical, but situated in the space between that is differance. On Bennington’s reading, Derrida’s work highlights through his reading the fundamental oppositionality of structures which are dynamically inter-related and co-dependent, existing through a structure of repetition rather than statically depending upon one term to determine the other. Binary

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structures are thus organic and dynamic inter-dependencies which depend essentially on both terms to elucidate and determine the functioning of each term, truth is then the paradox that is situated in the space between as one cannot conceive of one term without the other. In other words, phenomenologists have been caught up in situating truth as either transcendental or empirical, but this paper will demonstrate that because of the dynamic interdependency and differance between the transcendental which determines both as the quasi-transcendental, truth is neither transcendental nor empirical but quasi-transcendental, located in a paradoxical space of aporia between the transcendental and empirical.

The aporia is the paradox that transcendental is not conceivable without empirical and empirical is not conceivable without transcendental, truth is thus the paradox that transcendental and empirical are simultaneously similar and different, identical and non-identical, bearing sameness in difference. The transcendental is and is not the empirical, their difference translates into a non-difference or sameness, and hence the fundamental relationship between the transcendental and empirical is the aporia of sameness in difference. It is paradoxical that difference should translate into non-difference or sameness, yet this is the conditionality of metaphysics that Derrida discovers, for transcendental exists in and through the empirical through repetition just as the empirical is but a trace and repetition of the transcendental. Radical empiricists such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Blanchot negate idealism only to affirm it by repeating its ontological structure.

Building on Bennington’s paper that Derrida’s work is a work of reading that elucidates oppositional structures in order to show the dynamic interaction between them and interdependency, this paper will argue that the
quasi-transcendental in Derrida’s work functions as that which determines metaphysics by relating the transcendental and empirical in simultaneous identity and difference, identity and non-identity. The quasi-transcendental relates the transcendental and empirical in a paradoxical relation of sameness in difference. My work is essentially an extension of Bennington’s reading of the quasi-transcendental to readings of phenomenology, demonstrating that the quasi-transcendental is the conditionality that determines metaphysics in phenomenology. The transcendental and the empirical exist in a state of dynamic interaction and repetition rather than existing as ontologically separate substances as has been historically determined by metaphysics.

Taking the cue from Samuel Weber, who cogently argues for the condition of metaphysics as iterability, I will be extending his notions of iterability as a necessary condition of metaphysics to phenomenology. I build on Weber’s notion of iterability as a power or capacity of a concept to be translated. Weber argues that it is the fundamental structure of repetition and iterability or translatability and citability that determines metaphysics, which I affirm and incorporate into my readings of phenomenology. Weber’s arguments about the a priori necessity for iterability that actualizes a concept are indeed convincing, cogent and a faithful rendition of deconstruction where other commentators fail, as they do not grasp the fundamental condition of mediation as key to understanding Derrida’s take on metaphysics. Rather, they privilege the empirical mostly, leading to misconceptions of Derrida as Nietzschean and Heideggerean. Where Bennington had defined the quasi-transcendental as an excluded a priori difference which was necessary to thinking metaphysics, Weber defines the fundamental structure of metaphysics as necessitated by repetition and
iterability. In *Benjamin’s Abilities*, Weber draws a parallel between Benjamin’s philosophy and Derridean deconstruction in noting the affinity between “translatability” and “iterability”. Essentially, Derrida argues that the structure of the mark is its repeatability, its ability to differ from itself a priori, and Weber transposes this concept of the ability of the concept to be repeated to Benjamin’s work in noting that the Absolute has to be translated to be instantiated. Weber notes that the concept is defined by its “ability” to be translated and iterated, the concept is a certain power or potential to be repeated with a difference as the material, as Aristotle noted with his dynamis / energeia distinction or the difference between potentiality and actuality as a power to be translated and repeated with a difference, or iterability.

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

According to Weber’s Derridean rereading of Benjamin, the structure that informs their interpretation of the concept is a certain structural necessity for citability and repeatability or iterability is the a priori condition of a concept - its necessity to actualize itself. This is Deleuze’s translation from virtual to actual and Benjamin’s translation of the transcendental Absolute in his work, which many have interpreted as a Kantian a priori form, into empirical conditions as the transcendental is nothing outside the empirical, the virtual is nothing outside the actual, it is the nothing that separates transcendental and empirical which enables its paradoxical differentiation. On Weber’s interpretation, this a priori difference as a nothing which separates the transcendental and empirical, or iterability, is precisely what enables the actualization of the concept. The hallmark of a concept is its ability to be repeated and actualized.

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

The hallmark for the Absolute that Weber thus draws as an affinity between Benjamin’s philosophy of the Absolute and Derrida’s deconstruction is thus the structure of the concept as repeatability, iterability, the ability to be repeated, and a priori difference. The concept survives its death to the ideal world to live on in the material world as that which has been translated as concepts are irrevocably mediated, the transcendental is nothing outside the empirical, form has to actualize itself as content. Weber thus argues for the pertinence of deconstruction to an interpretation of Benjamin as both believe in the translatability of the Absolute as repetition with a difference, and a priori difference.

Might it seem problematic to superimpose Derrida onto Benjamin as Deconstruction as a school of thought comes much later than Benjamin’s writing? One would have to concede that Weber’s drawing of an affinity between Deconstruction and Benjamin’s translatability of the Absolute is quite convincing as both presuppose a priori difference and retrospective division between the transcendental and empirical which Derrida terms differance or the movement of the trace. That a concept has to die to itself ideally and survive itself in an empirical form or to live on after its death in the world is a idea that has been around since Hegel, who has argued for this similar death and survival with his notions of the Begriff surviving itself through the mediation of Love, in Hegel’s early work.\(^3\) Derrida’s discovery, and thus Benjamin’s, is an a priori condition of possibility that

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structures the very notion of concept. One would thus hardly read Weber’s re-reading of Benjamin as a forced analogy and retrospective superimposition of one form of thought upon another. Likewise I will be extending Weber’s reading of iterability as a certain power and ability of a concept to translate itself into the actual in my readings of metaphysicians such as Husserl and Heidegger. I extend Weber’s notion that the concept is nothing outside the structure of its repetition and iterability to readings of phenomenology.

I have just discussed Bennington and Weber whose cogent readings of deconstruction I will be extending to phenomenology. I build on their readings because they render deconstruction faithfully where other commentators fail, since they privilege the empirical and construe Derrida as Nietzschean or Heideggerean, which is an inaccurate assessment of deconstruction. In the next section I discuss Barry Smith, a vocal opponent of deconstruction who has popularized misconceptions of Derrida common in the phenomenological field today, and seek to address and dispel such misunderstandings of Derrida as these do not do justice to the rigour and complexity of his work.

“Now with respect to Derrida, I don't think that you can even begin to formulate a defence of Derrida by saying that he is trying to save metaphysics from the rigorous nature of analytic philosophy. That just does not fit, and it does not fit for this reason most of all- just as analytic philosophy has witnessed a renaissance in recent years of work in political philosophy, society, ethics, theories of justice, and these areas of human inquiry, so in recent years has analytic philosophy experienced a revival of
metaphysical theorizing. Analytic metaphysics is probably the most vibrant branch of analytic philosophy that there is today.”

Above we have Barry Smith, a vocal opponent of Derrida. This section addresses common misconceptions of Derrida popularized by critics such as Barry Smith. Barry Smith is an analytic philosopher who was trained in Mathematics and Philosophy under Michael Dummett at Oxford. His disinclination towards Derrida’s philosophy is based on a misreading of him as someone who destructively subverts truth, science and rationality. He violently objected to the conferment of an honorary doctorate on Derrida from Cambridge because he was of the opinion that it represented a betrayal of philosophy to confer such an honour upon a destructive nihilist and subvert. His hostility to Derrida’s philosophy is directed towards its lack of rigour and respect for truth and absolutes. A common mistake made by critics such as Barry Smith, as indicated in the quote above, is that Derrida is a destructive nihilist who subverts truth, reason and science. Barry Smith alleges that analytic metaphysics is far more rigorous that Derrida’s reading of metaphysics. This paper will counter that claim by demonstrating Derrida is no nihilist or destructive critic of rationality but a philosopher who examines the very conditions in which truth, reason and science are made possible. The Absolute is not subverted in Derrida but demonstrated to be fundamentally mediated through time and history, with the passage of differance. Derrida’s readings of metaphysics are to be viewed as more rigorous even than analytic philosophy because Derrida examines the very conditions in which metaphysics is made possible and how metaphysics is communicated through space and time, through the passage of differance.

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Derrida’s work is all about ethics and justice as well, contrary to Barry Smith’s claims, Derrida seeks to locate excluded differences and think the Other and unthought of language. What is missing from Analytic metaphysics is a certain self reflexivity about the conditions of possibility for metaphysics and thought, and it is this reflexivity about meta-conditions that determine metaphysics that Derrida’s work addresses. Analytic metaphysics, with its logical and predicative statements, its deductions and logical production of conclusions, reads far more like a word game, contrary to Barry Smith’s allegations about Derrida’s philosophy being games and puns, than the rigorous reflexive analysis of the conditions of metaphysics that Derrida propounds.

Barry Smith claims that Derrida plays linguistic games and puns which are not to be taken as serious philosophy. Contrary to this, this paper will demonstrate that Derrida is the philosopher par excellence as he performs meta-philosophy in establishing the conditions in which Truth is made possible and communicated through history, time and space. Derrida is no empiricist or nihilist as I will demonstrate through his readings of radical empiricists such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Blanchot. Derrida is a philosopher of the conditions in which metaphysics is made possible and how it functions through the principle of iterability, or repetition with a difference. Derrida is no counterfeit philosopher with pretensions to subverting truth and authority as Smith claims, but a master philosopher who establishes the conditions in which truth is made possible and conveyed through time and history. It is also naive to assume as Barry Smith does, that Derrida’s work is no more than a continuation of Heidegger and Nietzsche as Derrida explicitly criticizes their radical empiricisms in their failure to acknowledge aporia and differance as the conditionality that
structures metaphysics. Barry Smith takes on a poorly understood conception of Derrida that is widespread even among contemporary phenomenologists, that Derrida is nihilistic, subverts truth, and is empiricist. My paper will address such misconceptions and demonstrate that Derrida affirms, rather than destroys metaphysics. Another critique of Derrida in undertaken by Ian Hunter in “The History of Theory.” Hunter argues that Derrida, by taking a transcendental turn, had undermined history and empiricism in the social sciences. Quoting Hunter, “In a striking reprise of the history of Christian university metaphysics, Derrida posits the transcendent onto which philosophy opens as the domain of infinite omnitemporal being as truth, in relation to which all merely finite, time-bound viewpoints—the domain of history—must remain uncomprehending and subordinate: requirement.” This is quite simply a remarkable misreading of Derrida. Derrida demonstrates in texts such as Introduction to the Origin of Geometry that the ideal requires history and its empirical medium to realize itself. Indeed for Derrida, the “Absolute is Passage.” There are no grounds for claiming that Derrida undermines and subordinates history. For Derrida, history and empiricism are the conditions by which the ideal is realized. Instead of Suppresss history or empiricism, what Derrida’s work performs is an opening up of philosophy to see these terms as necessary conditions of possibility to the actualizing of the ideal. Derrida demonstrates that the condition of the idea is its history and actualization as the empirical; hence Hunter does not do justice to Derrida by misreading him. Readings of Derrida as ahistorical are common but unfortunately,

6 Ibid. pp. 82-83
misled. Derrida’s work demonstrates the necessity of the medium as history to the realization of a concept.

For instance, the subject is nothing without its historicity, because it is through these acts, characteristics, performances and utterances that a stake to the “I” can be claimed. The self does not exist in a vacuum, but in and through its history. This is the necessity of iterability to the realization of every event and phenomenon. Just as the subject is nothing outside its staging and performance, the ideal is nothing outside the material.

To discuss the matter in more concrete terms, every designation of a phenomenon requires its opposite to delineate itself against to be realized. Just as Hunter is opposing history to the transcendent and then expelling the transcendent as something which has fundamentally contaminated the social sciences, Derrida demonstrates that truth cannot function without fiction, philosophy cannot function without non-philosophy. In a moment I will respond to charges that Derrida is nihilistic, but the supposition that Derrida is a nihilist likewise cannot function without the opposite claim that Derrida is more of an idealist, which this paper will claim at some points. The supposition that Derrida shares more in common with Nietszche and Heidegger is a moment in the history of philosophy, at which Derrida took a turn, claiming to be neither Nietsczhean nor Platonist, but between. This is because each term requires its opposite to define itself against. Just as the idea cannot survive without its history, transcendental and empirical require each other as opposing terms to define themselves as I will demonstrate throughout this paper. The same can be said of philosophy and non-philosophy. Without its opposition to non-philosophy, idealisms such as Husserl’s cannot stand. Likewise without their opposition to idealism, materialisms such as Merleau-Ponty’s and Heidegger’s cannot derive any
meaning because it is only the dividing moment of a priori difference and
the separation of each term from its opposing term that each term acquires
its meaning and coherence.

In this paper, I will argue about the necessity of exemplarity or
iterability to the realization of a concept. In response to the charge that this
paper sublates all differences into anonymity and thus brings Derrida to
nihilism, my response is that Derrida is affirmative ultimately of difference
and singularity in his move to respond ethically to the Other and reinscribe
the Other into phenomenology. This paper will show consistently how
thought is generally shadowed by its unthought, as the ghost of a text returns
to haunt it. Hence Derrida’s move is a move to include this shadow of
philosophy and Other of the text in showing that it is necessary to thinking
and conceptualizing the One. Where I argue that difference is sameness, this
move is not to flatten philosophy into an ahistorical mass, but to suggest that
philosophy, in its various forms, is an expression of the Absolute and
transcendental-empirical difference. Transcendental idealism and radical
empiricism both require transcendental-empirical difference or difference in
order to function, and what I will suggest throughout this paper is that this a
priori or transcendental-empirical difference should be foregrounded rather
than suppressed by confining philosophy to either idealism or empiricism.
Each thinking of the transcendental or empirical requires its opposite in
order to be conceptualized, hence the suggestion that difference translates
into sameness is not a nihilistic suppression of identity, but affirming
ultimately that metaphysics is essentially a structure that requires opposites
to define itself. Since both transcendental and empirical are essential to the
thinking of this structure, it makes no sense to define the transcendental
without the empirical or the empirical without the transcendental. Rather
philosophy is a double writing, dynamically consisting of both ideal and material, and if there is any anonymity or suppression of identity it is only the recognition that historically, philosophy has been constituted by metaphysics – which consists historically of both transcendental and empirical. These terms have not changed despite reconfigurations of philosophy either into pure idealism or pure empiricism. However each reincarnation of philosophy as either pure idealism or pure empiricism affirms the structurality of structure whether in affirming it as a centre or deviating from it as a non-centre. What does not change is the language of metaphysics and its terms such as transcendental and empirical which have haunted phenomenology and philosophy throughout. In all its incarnations thus, whether as pure idealism, or as pure empiricism, Derrida has demonstrated the necessity of repetition to thinking these terms as they do not exist separately but through iterability, or incarnation. Mind does not exist outside body, transcendental does not exist outside empirical, what remains is the essential dual nature of metaphysics that requires its opposite in order to be delineated and defined, philosophy is thus democratized by coming to terms with the equal necessity of both terms to thinking each other.

Against charges of nihilism, I would argue that reducing difference to sameness is not a move that suppresses identity but enables it. Where Derrida argues that Christian theology does not differ essentially from Heidegger’s atheistic ontology, he is not consigning identity to nothing but demonstrating that these share more in common than is supposed in a strict division. Each term requires the exclusion and repudiation of the opposing term in order to be defined, and thus shares ultimately, the same metaphysical and ontological structure. It would be impossible to conceive
of Christianity without its opposite, atheism, and thus upholding their similarity is not a move of suppressing identity but a move to recognize the structural necessity of thinking the ghost or shadow of a text in order to conceptualize it. Also, Derrida does not maintain the difference is ultimately a non-difference, but a paradoxical simultaneous similarity and difference. The transcendental is and is not the empirical because it precedes it but has to be realized through it. Hence it both is, and is not the empirical. The difference is not suppressed but doubled into a paradoxical relation of simultaneous similarity and difference.

I will also take pains to suggest throughout this paper that Derrida is not a materialist but a thinker of paradox and aporia. It is the aporia that the transcendental both is and is not the empirical that has sustained metaphysics, due to the fact that the phenomenological reduction can only be enabled if the difference between the transcendental and empirical is a difference which is nothing. Hence the difference is paradoxically a simultaneous similarity and difference. Hence against the charges of nihilism, Derrida is not a suppressor of differences but a democratic thinker of the Other that is necessary to thinking the one. Derrida is a thinker of the double writing that is necessary to conceptuality and thus does not suppress identity but only expands and multiplies it in showing that opposites require each other to sustain the metaphysical project. Hence in suggesting that differences are ultimately similarities, Derrida is not homogenizing philosophy, rather he is elucidating the base conditions necessary to thinking philosophy – each term requires its Other to delineate itself against, and hence there can be no strict ontological division or either/or logic, rather it is the thinking of the third space, the neither/nor and ultimately transcendental-empirical difference which will allow us to view philosophy as a whole
which is organic and constituent of parts rather than a strict idealism or strict empiricism. Derrida is thus a democratizer of phenomenology to the extent that he recognizes that transcendental and empirical are empty terms which mean nothing separately, but only exist in relation to each other and metaphysics as an organic structure and whole. Derrida is then not a nihilist but a thinker of opposites and the paradox that one term cannot function without its opposing term, phenomenology’s quest for an either/or truth in a pure idealism or pure empiricism thus cannot hold because these terms only mean something in relation to each other. In response to charges of nihilism then, my argument is that Derrida doubles identity instead of relegating it to nothing. Derrida does this through demonstrating that the unthought forms the basis of thought and the ghost of a text always returns to haunt it.

In this sense, this paper maintains the right to viewing Derrida as a thinker of paradox in simultaneous similarity and difference rather than a thinker of pure difference in the vein of Deleuze, Zizek, Badiou or Delanda. While these thinkers are valuable in bringing insights to the tyranny of homogeneity and the Same, these thinkers paradoxically commit the same crime that they accuse idealists of by committing philosophy to pure materialism. As argued throughout this paper, because materialism exists only in relation to idealism, one would suppress transcendental-empirical difference in committing to a pure empiricism, materialism or pure realm of difference. Derrida is a thinker not committed to thinking pure difference but paradox, simultaneous similarity and difference, identity in non-identity, but in doing so he does not commit all to the realm of the Same of an ahistorical mass because he doubles ontology. He does this by committing us to see opposing points of view, in their separate uniqueness and integrity, without committing and consigning these to a realm of a sublated ideal a la Hegel.
Derrida is then far from being a nihilist but a thinker that enables us to see that philosophy consists dynamically of opposites and each term is essential to illuminating the other, hence a pure idealism or pure empiricism does not stand. Derrida is a thinker of irreducible difference in transcendental-empirical difference being the ultimate difference that grounds philosophy, hence far from being destructive or a nihilist, Derrida is profoundly affirmative. Derrida affirms opposites, but shows their necessity to thinking each other, and thus includes the Other and democratizes philosophy by demonstrating that philosophy cannot function without this a priori difference or oppositionality.

Building on a priori difference, my readings of the quasi-transcendental also take a point of departure from contemporary readers of Derrida such as Leonard Lawlor, Rodolphe Gasche, and Paola Marrati. Leonard Lawlor argues that the quasi-transcendental is defined as immanence- “In Derrida, there is a double necessity between an indefinite series of opposites, such as presence and absence, genesis and structure, form and content, law and arbitrariness, thought and unthought, empirical and transcendental, origin and retreat, foundation and founded, and so on.” 7 Lawlor then pronounces “Immanence is complete”. I will argue that the relation between the transcendental and empirical is not immanence but paradoxical identity in non-identity, sameness in difference rather than an immanent relation that relates transcendental to empirical in a straightforward mutual implication as immanence implies. Paola Marrati defines the quasi-transcendental as the contamination of the transcendental

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and empirical- “In Derrida’s work, the confrontation with Husserl and Heidegger, with a thought of the transcendental and an ontology of temporality, takes the form of an irreducible contamination, a contamination, first of all, of finitude and infinitude, of life and death.”  

I will argue that it is not a mere contamination of the transcendental and empirical as this implies a sort of conflation and straightforward mutual implication but the relation of the transcendental to empirical in a relation of paradoxical identity in non-identity. Rodolphe Gasche comes closer to my interpretation of the quasi-transcendental when he writes, “The quasi-transcendental and empirical as conditions of possibility and impossibility concerning the conceptual difference between subject and object and even between Dasein and Being.”  

However while I agree with Gasche that the quasi-transcendental is a meta-condition of metaphysics determining the transcendental and empirical through the dynamic relation of iterability and differance, I diverge from his interpretation of the transcendental and empirical as a relationship of infrastructure as I do not conceive the relation between the transcendental and empirical as infrastructural or systemic, but something that exceeds the very thinking of system. This is because it is primarily a paradox and non-system of simultaneous identity and difference, sameness in difference, identity in non-identity which is irreducible to the conceptualization of this relation as systemic or infrastructural.

In this paper, I will be discussing the relation of phenomenology to deconstruction. The relation between phenomenology and deconstruction has been misconstrued by contemporary phenomenologists to be one of

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interruption and disruption. Contemporary phenomenologists regard Derrida as a destroyer of phenomenology. Contrary to this assertion, my paper will suggest that Derrida contributes to the phenomenological project by discovering its conditions of possibility and thus strengthens it by offering a meta-phenomenological critique of it, critique that does not serve to destroy but affirm and strengthen by bringing phenomenology to terms with its conditions of possibility. In my discussion of Husserl I will demonstrate, through Derridean readings of phenomenology, that transcendental is nothing outside the empirical through iterability and differance. Likewise, I will demonstrate that radical empiricists such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Blanchot and Ricouer require the transcendental as a point of exclusion from their philosophies in order to maintain their respective empiricisms. Husserl’s transcendental requires the empirical to be excluded in order to establish his idealism, just as the radical empiricisms of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Blanchot, Levinas and Ricoeur require the transcendental to be excluded from their empiricisms, accounting for the transcendental on empirical grounds, in order to establish them. Derrida shows that each text is inescapably haunted by its double, and hence deconstruction becomes a double science and a double-writing, in which the ghost of a text returns to haunt it through aporia and the delimitation of limit. Truth is thus neither transcendental nor empirical, but quasi-transcendental as the transcendental is nothing outside the empirical and vice versa. Truth is differance, or the difference between the transcendental and empirical rather than belonging to either side as the transcendental is simultaneously the empirical, related in paradoxical simultaneous similarity and difference, identity and non-identity. The transcendental is and is not the empirical, their difference translates into a sameness, as the transcendental and empirical are
separated by a difference which is not a difference, differance. Transcendental-empirical distinction is an illusion, hence the divide of phenomenology into strict idealism or empiricism is based upon an aporia because these exist only in relation to each other through iterability and differance. This paper thus demonstrates that Derrida saves phenomenology by addressing the problem of transcendental and empirical genesis through his concepts of differance, iterability and the quasi-transcendental. Derrida thus inscribes phenomenology in a more powerful form through bringing it to terms with its condition of possibility as the quasi-transcendental. This is because it is the quasi-transcendental which institutes the possibility of transcendental-empirical distinction and the impossibility of their separation as the transcendental and empirical exist only in dynamic relation to each other through differance and iterability. Derrida thus enables phenomenology to be reflexive about the conditions that bring about its mode of production and functioning. In this way, Derrida strengthens and renders the phenomenological project more powerfully than it would have otherwise been without his intervention. Differance, the quasi-transcendental and iterability will be shown to be conditions that phenomenology cannot function without. Derrida’s meta-phenomenology thus saves phenomenology from its fixation over a pseudo crisis or struggle over transcendental or empirical truth, because truth is neither transcendental nor empirical, indeed these terms are incoherent as entities separate from each other as the transcendental is simultaneously the empirical and does not exist outside a dynamic relation to the empirical through iterability and differance. As transcendental empirical difference is an illusion, truth rather is quasi-transcendental, neither transcendental nor empirical but the paradoxical space between that allows the thinking of both. This paper thus argues that
Derrida rescues phenomenology from its crisis of origins and truth by demonstrating that the relationship between the transcendental and empirical is dynamic and interdependent, through iterability and differance, hence one cannot define one term without the other as each term requires the exclusion of the other for the distinction to be upheld. Hence, truth is differance and the quasi-transcendental, the difference between the transcendental and empirical which is the foundation for thinking both.

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