Reflections on Derrida’s Metaphysical Phenomenology

Chung Chin-Yi

Introduction

This paper examines the aporia that has come to pass in phenomenology: phenomenology has divided itself into either transcendental idealism or radical empiricism, and an impasse has occurred as to where truth is to be located, as idealism or empiricism. Phenomenology has traditionally assumed that the transcendental and the empirical are divisible and ontologically separate. Traditionally, the transcendental has been understood to be the ground of the empirical, whereas the empirical is thought to be but the simulacrum of the transcendental. Phenomenology, in its divide into transcendental idealism and radical empiricism, assumes these are distinct ontological spheres. Hence Husserl with his transcendental reduction strives to bracket the empirical to reduce indication to expression, while empiricists, though they may not easily recognize themselves as such, such as Heidegger, Levinas, Ricouer, Merleau-Ponty and Blanchot, have taken the transcendental as a site of exclusion or negation for their phenomenologies. In their reverse reduction they seek to exclude the transcendental as they view this purification as being faithful to phenomena, returning to the things themselves.

This paper problematizes the relationship between the transcendental and empirical, because it demonstrates that the transcendental is simultaneously the empirical. The transcendental is nothing outside of the empirical and vice versa, because the transcendental needs to be iterated as the empirical to come into being, just as the empirical needs the mediation of the transcendental through iterability to come about. For instance, we would not grasp the object without the transcendental properties of space and time. Yet we would also not grasp the object if there were no empirical instantiation of the object. Hence the transcendental needs to be iterated as the empirical to come into being. Hence a pure idealism such as Husserl’s or a pure empiricism such as Levinas’ cannot stand, because delineating the transcendental requires the exclusion of the empirical to define itself, just as delineating the empirical requires the exclusion of the transcendental to define itself. Transcendental and empirical exist only through a dynamic relation of différance and iterability, as the transcendental is and is not the empirical, their difference translates into sameness. This is because the transcendental and empirical remain separated and distinguished by nothing. Were the transcendental separable from the empirical, no phenomenological reduction would be able to take place, hence the difference between the transcendental is an illusion as the transcendental does not exist outside the dynamic relationship of iterability to the empirical. Were the empirical separable from the transcendental, this would also translate as a paradox, as the radical empiricists we discussed throughout this paper have taken the transcendental as a point of contention and exclusion. Heidegger deliberately excludes Christian theology from his philosophy, just as Levinas and Ricoeur privilege the Other and embodiment over the Self, excluding the Absolute in their phenomenology. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty and Blanchot emphasize corporeality and Other-directed phenomenologies, which I argue are negative or inverse phenomenologies, and take the transcendental as a point of dissociation from their philosophies. I demonstrate that this separation of the transcendental and empirical is thus not coherent as these phenomenologists require the transcendental as a site of exclusion to define their philosophies. Hence, defining the empirical in the absence of the transcendental is
nonsensical. As I demonstrate through readings of transcendental idealism and radical empiricism, both are repetitions of the same through iterability. Heidegger’s radical empiricism does not differ from Husserl’s transcendental idealism, because their ontological structure is essentially the same. Metaphysics and post-Metaphysics are doublings rather than negations of each other, as we see Christian theology and Heidegger’s post-metaphysics share the same ontological and metaphysical structure, because reversed Platonism remains a form of Platonism. Heidegger’s post-metaphysics requires the exclusion of the transcendental while Husserl’s idealism requires the exclusion of the empirical; hence both exist only in dynamic relation to each other through iterability and are essentially the same. No phenomenological reduction would take place were the transcendental and empirical separable, hence empiricism and idealism are repetitions rather than divergences from each other. The transcendental is and is not the empirical; their difference translates into sameness, and hence transcendental idealism and radical empiricism are repetitions of the same through iterability and différance. As transcendental-empirical difference is an illusion, truth would be neither transcendental nor empirical. Rather the difference or différance between transcendental and empirical would be its meta-condition and that which enables the thinking of its structurality. Truth is neither presence nor absence, Jew or Greek, being or non-being, self or other, but the difference and différance between these two extremes. Derrida emphasizes the importance of iterability or repetition of both extremes as essentially the same. Truth is thus quasi-transcendental or the interval between transcendental and empirical which enables both.

The transcendental requires the empirical to be defined and vice versa, while their difference translates into a paradoxical sameness because transcendental-empirical difference is an illusion. This paper thus demonstrates the necessity of the quasi-transcendental to conceiving the relationship between the transcendental and empirical, that which is neither transcendental nor empirical, but is prior to both as it is the anterior difference that enables us to think and conceptualize both transcendental and empirical. In place of transcendental or empirical privilege this paper argues that the quasi-transcendental and différance are conditions necessary for conceiving of phenomenology. It is transcendental-empirical difference, the point of distinction between the transcendental and empirical, that enables us to think. Truth is thus not localizable to either transcendental or empirical, but translates as différance and the quasi-transcendental as we require transcendental-empirical difference to conceptualize phenomenology in the first place. Every designation of the transcendental requires its distinction from the empirical to be upheld in Husserl’s transcendental idealism, whereas the radical empiricists, as I have previously mentioned, take their point of departure from the transcendental, making it a point to negate or exclude Christian theology or the ontology of the Absolute and the same, in order to define their phenomenologies. This paper thus negotiates the space between the transcendental and empirical as the difference and a priori condition necessary for thinking and conceptualizing phenomenology in its totality, as an idealism without the empirical or an empiricism without the ideal translates into an absurdity or incoherence.

Phenomenology’s divide into transcendental idealism or radical empiricism, with its subsequent crisis over origin and truth, and its location presents a false conflict because the transcendental is simultaneously the empirical. Their difference is an illusion or a sameness. The transcendental is nothing outside the empirical and vice versa. This is because transcendental and empirical only come into being through the structure of iterability and différance. Without the transcendental, it would be impossible to conceive of the empirical, and vice versa. Hence phenomenology is based upon the aporia of the quasi-transcendental,
that which is neither transcendental nor empirical but is the difference that allows the thinking of both. The transcendental is the empirical because the distinction is an illusory distinction; the phenomenological reduction would not be able to take place if the distinction were ontological and substantive. The privilege of either transcendental or empirical upheld by both camps of idealists and empiricists hence generates aporia as the transcendental and empirical are divided by nothing, and their difference translates into sameness. Transcendental idealism requires the empirical to be a site of exclusion, whereas radical empiricism requires the transcendental to be a site of exclusion. Hence both terms are empty terms when defined in isolation from each other because the transcendental is nothing outside the empirical, just as the empirical is the repeated trace of the transcendental. Transcendental and empirical are thus historical names derived from metaphysics, based upon an illusory distinction, which can only be defined in dynamic relation to each other as each term requires the exclusion of the opposing term for the distinction to be upheld.

The transcendental and empirical can only come into being through iterability and *différance*, as the transcendental is simultaneously the empirical, and does not exist outside the dynamic relation to it. This is because the transcendental translates into the empirical: the aporia of metaphysics is that their difference translates into a repetition of the same, or iterability. Hence, we know of no transcendental that can be defined in isolation from the empirical, and vice versa. The debate over the source of truth as transcendental idealism or radical empiricism is thus misled. In place, I argue that truth is neither transcendental nor empirical but quasi-transcendental, the space between the transcendental and empirical. This quasi-transcendental is the *différance* between them, which gives rise to the distinguishing movement of the trace, retrospectively producing both transcendental and empirical.

There is an aporia that had occurred in phenomenology. On Husserl, I argue that there was no presentation but only representation; ideality has to be repeated with a difference or iterated in order to be constituted. On Heidegger, I argue that Heidegger’s non-metaphysics was essentially a repetition of it, and that there was no substantial difference between metaphysics and non-metaphysics or representational and post-representational thinking. On Ricoeur, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty and Blanchot, I argue that their reversals of phenomenology to embrace a negative phenomenology or radical empiricism ended up being a repetition of metaphysics rather than an overcoming of it, as they remain bound to its ontological structure by negating metaphysics and thus repeat it like Heidegger. Iterability and signature form the conditions of possibility for the perpetuation of phenomenology and metaphysics. Derrida’s discovery is thus the a priori condition of possibility for conceptuality—its iterability and mediation, or signature. Derrida’s meta-phenomenology is a tracing to the roots of its conditions of possibility for conceptuality, and in this paper I have located these conditions as *différance* and the quasi-transcendental. My readings do not intend to elevate Derrida to absolute status, but rather I wish to suggest that Derrida has discovered the grounding conditions for metaphorics as *différance* and the quasi-transcendental. Indeed, such a reading strengthens rather than destroys the metaphysical project because of its meta-phenomenological status as inquiry.

Derrida, through humor, subtlety and irony, demonstrates that the traditional hierarchies in phenomenology and metaphysics, be they empirical or transcendental idealism, simply do not hold, as phenomenology always lands in an aporia when one seeks to privilege the transcendental or empirical. In place, as we have seen in the discussions throughout this paper, phenomenology is conditioned by the fundamental phenomena of iterability and signature, transcendental and empirical are not separable or distinct as these concepts have to
be irrevocably mediated. An idealism without empiricism or an empiricism without idealism translates into an absurdity. Rather, it is repetition of the transcendental in the empirical, deconstruction as a double science and double writing, which produces the economy of both the transcendental and empirical through the movement of the trace.

I now examine various aporias that afflict phenomenology—Husserl’s phenomenological reduction cannot hold if the transcendental is separate from the empirical, indeed, nothing separates the transcendental and the empirical and thus they are essentially the same. I demonstrate that Heidegger’s repeated attempts to inverse in order to negate metaphysics only reproduced metaphysics as a ghostly double that returned to haunt his anti-metaphysics which remained bound to its ontological structure and vocabulary. In addition, through readings of Levinas, Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty and Blanchot it is shown that their radical empiricisms and privilege of Other over the same repeated metaphysics like Heidegger, in negating it and reversing its structure, thus reproduce and affirm it paradoxically. In all of these demonstrations, I have shown that the impossibility of a text is precisely its site of possibility; deconstruction proceeds by exposing the limit of a text and then delimiting it towards the Other that it had repressed—its method is thus transgression and exceeding of limits imposed by a text towards its blind spots through exposing an aporia, and then proceeding to show the unthought of a text that needs to be thought in order to address this aporia. Transcendental and empirical are related through a dynamic relation of iterability and repetition with a difference. Hence metaphysics is based fundamentally upon an aporia or the conditionality of the quasi-transcendental, which is neither transcendental nor empirical but the condition that enables the thinking of both. Derrida thus inscribes phenomenology in a more powerful form through naming its condition of possibility as the quasi-transcendental, thus bringing to phenomenology reflexivity about its method of production and functioning.

**Intentionality and iterability**

In *Ideas 1*, Husserl proclaims that the concept of intentionality “is a concept which at the threshold of phenomenology is quite dispensable as its starting point and basis”. In the simplest of terms, intentionality signifies that consciousness is consciousness of something. This integrates the transcendental and empirical in a hyle-morphe relationship. Consciousness contains sensory contents or hyle, such as the data of colour, touch, sound and the like which can only become part of intentional structures or forms (morphe) through animating synpaper. As Husserl expresses it, the material or hyle “furnishes a woof that can enter into the intentional tissue, material that can enter into intentional formations”.

Husserl, in his efforts to unravel the complicated workings of consciousness, seems continually only to entangle himself in greater and even knottier problems. For instance, the act of reduction and the suspension of the natural through the transcendental epoche seems to undo entirely the hyle-morphe relationship that Husserl indicates and the act of reduction hence lands phenomenology in an aporia by negating the movement of iterability and difference. This is where Derrida’s notion of iterability appeals to us as far more convincing. It is the repetition that retrospectively divides and differentiates transcendental and empirical in the reproductive movement of *différance* that makes metaphysics and philosophy possible. The reduction simply distorts the transcendental empirical hyle-morphe relationship in suggesting these can be separated. Intentionality is the logical precursor of *différance*, which posits the dialectical economy of both the transcendental and empirical. This, thus, includes both consciousness and intended object in a dynamic relation of repetition with a difference.
Critics of Derrida

Contemporary phenomenologists, such as Dermot Moran and Robert Sokolowski, mistakenly characterize Derrida’s reconfiguration of phenomenology as an attack on idealism and a privileging in its place of absence, *différance*, play, and the empirical. Moran characterizes Derrida as a relativist and a skeptic whose privileging of *différance* and deferral leads to nihilism in which meanings cannot be determined, or are endlessly deferred in textual indeterminacy. Such readings of Derrida are essentially mistaken. Derrida’s deconstruction does not overthrow the ideal to privilege the empirical and lead to a destructive nihilism as they assert. It is an examination of the conditions of possibility for metaphysics. This is through *différance* which enables transcendental genesis, as well as the principle of iterability, or the repetition with a difference which retrospectively differentiates transcendental and empirical through the trace. Iterability enables metaphysical production.

Derrida traces the conditions of possibility for transcendental genesis to the meta-concepts of *différance* and trace, the spacing or interval and temporization between the transcendental and empirical which enables their production. Derrida also does not repudiate idealism to replace it with empiricism or a play of meanings, but posits a priori difference, and iterability, or repetition with a difference of the origin. A priori difference is only produced in retrospect through the differentiating trace that produces the transcendental and empirical. These a priori conditions of *différance* and trace constitute a meta-phenomenology in accounting for transcendental genesis. Derrida’s philosophy does not privilege absence or the empirical. Rather, it posits the quasi-transcendental as the supplement that enables the transcendental. It is the *différance* between the transcendental and empirical, or the spacing and repetition with a difference between them that makes philosophy possible. This is the play between presence and absence that makes philosophy possible, therefore, what Derrida characterizes is this fundamental relationship of *différance* which makes philosophy possible. Derrida does not overturn the transcendental in favor of the empirical. Derrida’s philosophy is not empiricism but a philosophy of mediation, a positing of the quasi-transcendental as that which enables philosophy. This is the accounting for the meta-concepts that enable phenomenology as *différance* and the trace.

Dermot Moran is also mistaken in characterizing *différance* as merely the endless deferral of meaning leading to a nothingness or nihilism. *Différance* is an acknowledgement of the economy of the repetition of transcendental and the empirical in the reproductive movement of iterability rather than a lapse into empirical substitution or the elevating of the sign over the signified. It is an acknowledgement that the condition of possibility of signification is repetition, or representation. (*Vergegenwartigung*) I also contest Moran’s view that Derrida privileges the singular over the universal. Derrida argues that the universal must be expressed through the singular. It is not his project to repudiate universals or idealism but to examine the conditions of possibility in which metaphysics produces itself, which is repetition and representation, or iterability.

In *Speech and Phenomena*, for instance, the expressive represents pure ideality, a stratum of sense separated from empirical data, it is a form of transcendental signified and a metaphysics of presence. Derrida questions the strict distinction between the expressive and the indicative that Husserl makes. For Derrida, this rigid dichotomization leads to a form of phonocentrism and logocentrism. Derrida questions the strict distinction between the transcendental and the empirical and argues for an interweaving between the two. This interweaving he calls *différance*, or the repetition of *Vorstellung* (ideality) in empirical life,
which he calls *Vergegenwartigung*, reproductive repetition. *Vergegenwartigung* involves the objectification of something as being itself absent (past, merely imaginary) whereas repetition and recognition of an expression does not. The sign is made possible by its repeatability, or iterability, and it is in this repetition that Derrida locates the movement of trace, *différance*, or supplementarity. Derrida argues that the sign’s possibility of repetition conditions presence, thus non-presence constitutes presence rather than the reverse. In this sense, ideality is bifurcated into two. As Derrida puts forth, the presence of the present is derived from repetition and not the reverse.

Derrida questions the possibility of making a rigid distinction between the expressive and the indicative and isolating the expressive in order to privilege it as a site of presence. In questioning the reduction of indication, Derrida wishes to question the possibility of the existence of exclusive expressive signs. He argues that expression and indication is always interwoven and mutually implicated. This is through the relation of iterability or quasi-transcendental.

What Moran and Sokolowski miss entirely in their interpretations of Derrida is his positing of the quasi-transcendental in order to save phenomenology from an aporia by nullifying the reproductive movement of iterability through the act of phenomenological reduction. They simply assume that Derrida dismisses the transcendental and mounts an attack on idealism. While Moran is right in noting that Derrida posits the contamination of the transcendental and empirical, he is wrong to interpret this as amounting to a valorization of the empirical, or the signifier over the signified. Derrida’s suggestion that there is nothing outside the text does not, as Moran suggests, lead to a nihilism. Rather, it is a suggestion that the transcendental must be contained or embodied by the text rather than posited as exterior and separate from it. Moran’s charge that Derrida’s repudiation of logocentrism leads to a rejection of the law of non-contradiction also misses the point of Derrida’s account of metaphysics entirely, Derrida’s argument precisely captures the aporia, and hence the contradiction, that metaphysics lands itself in by negating the constituting movement of iterability and *différance* in the phenomenological reduction. It locates this contradiction and resolves it through the positing of the quasi-transcendental, or the repetition of the transcendental in the empirical, or the mediation of the transcendental in the empirical.

Also, Derrida does not repudiate logocentrism. He merely examines the conditions of possibility for logocentrism, *différance* and the trace. Moran is also mistaken in charging Derrida with linguistic idealism with his statement that there is nothing outside the text. Derrida is not arguing that there is nothing outside language, but rather that language is instrumental for meaning and its condition of possibility for coming to fruition. Derrida’s argument is for mediation of the transcendental through the empirical rather than an exchanging of idealism for context or the empirical. It is the argument of this paper that Derrida, far from being a destructive critic of phenomenology as Moran and Sokolowski argue, is in fact examining the mode in which phenomenology is made possible. This is through his notion of repetition and the principle of iterability which constitutes the ideal.

This makes for a more complete and sensible reading of metaphysics in place of one that lands phenomenology in an aporia through the exclusion of *différance* or the quasi-transcendental that occurs through the reduction. The phenomenological reduction is only enabled by the nothing, or *différance*, which distinguishes the transcendental and empirical. Hence, metaphysics should be brought to acknowledge this a priori condition of possibility that enables transcendental genesis and the very possibility of mediation of the transcendental.
and empirical through iterability. Phenomenology becomes enabled by *différance* as its condition of possibility as the very act of phenomenological reduction presupposes this a priori difference between transcendental and empirical which translates as nothing.

In this paper, I have examined Derrida’s reception in the phenomenological field. I examined common misconceptions of Derrida as an empiricist and nihilist, and allegations that his post-phenomenology is a destruction of phenomenology. Contrary to these charges, I have argued that Derrida’s post-phenomenology is a meta-phenomenology in its account for the conditions of possibility for transcendental-empirical distinction through his notions of *différance* and trace, as well as the quasi-transcendental. The quasi-transcendental is the interval between the transcendental and empirical which enables the thinking of both. Iterability and repetition name the conditions of possibility of ideality rather than being any simple destructive negation of it. The transcendental is only enabled by its signature, or difference from the origin in order to be communicated through space and time. It is the written mark, the quasi-transcendental, that which is neither transcendental nor empirical, which makes possible the distinction between the transcendental and empirical. At the same time, it makes impossible a sphere of purely expressive signs without the distinction. The written mark functions as if it was transcendental, but without it no distinction between the transcendental or empirical would be able to take place, and were the distinction impossible no transcendental or pure expressive realm would take place either. Hence the phenomenological project becomes possible through this paradoxical relation of the quasi-transcendental, relating the transcendental and empirical in simultaneous identity and difference, identity in non-identity. As a result, it is made more powerful through an acknowledgement of the quasi-transcendental as its condition of possibility.

**Works Cited**


**Footnotes:**


2 Ibid.,§86, p. 233.