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## DERRIDA, HUSSERL, AND THE PROBLEM OF PRIOR SENSE

Ralph Shain

**ABSTRACT:** In his introduction to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry", Derrida makes several claims for the superiority of Husserl's philosophy over Kant's. The main claim of superiority is Husserl's grounding of transcendental historicity and transcendental intersubjectivity in concrete experience. For Kant, Derrida points out, the truth of geometry is already constituted, and thus must be extrinsic to all history. But for Husserl, every 'objectivity' has a history, including geometrical objectivities, and these objectivities did not pre-exist the originary intuitive act. I will explore these claims, as they reach into the heart of issues concerning time and temporality.

First, I will consider Derrida's interpretation of Husserl, and argue that there is an unclarity or a contradiction in Husserl's treatment of the temporality of ideal objects, which arises from his avoidance of the issue of whether ideal objects pre-exist their first intuiting. Derrida interprets Husserl as if Husserl had indeed dealt with this issue, thus avoiding the same issue in turn. I will examine the arguments in support of Derrida's interpretation, but will provide reasons for rejecting each argument. Then I consider various ways of resolving the ambiguity, and will conclude by looking at the implications of Derrida's avoidance of this issue for the project of deconstruction in general.

**KEYWORDS:** Metaphysics; Phenomenology; Time; Derrida; Husserl; Deconstruction

"In this situation, Sigwart does not seem to me to press forward to a clear position." Husserl, *Logical Investigations* I, p. 150

"... (let us leave to one side the grave problem of a world antecedent to this idea)..." Derrida, *Problem of Genesis in Husserl*, p. 170

Did the ideal objects of geometry pre-exist the work of the Ur-geometer? Were the geometrical equations true before formulated by the Ur-geometer? Was Newton's law of gravitation true before Newton lived? Did the sun exist before there were human

beings? Do geology and paleontology make meaningful, descriptive claims about times prior to human existence? What can be said of the world prior to the idea of philosophy? Did time pass before there were human beings? These questions are variations of a single problem which I call the problem of prior sense. This problem most pointedly touches the dispute between transcendental idealism and phenomenology<sup>1</sup>, on the one hand, and empirical realism, on the other, yet it has been difficult for phenomenologists to focus on this problem.<sup>2</sup> This paper aims to fill this gap in the literature.<sup>3</sup>

Derrida claimed that Husserl made a clear advance over Kant in dealing with this problem. For Husserl, according to Derrida, ideal objects did not pre-exist their originary intuiting. Yet when one looks at Husserl's treatment of the issue, one sees that right to the end of his writings, Husserl never clearly takes a stand on this issue. This is especially striking as at the beginning of his career, in the *Logical Investigations*, he accuses Sigwart of waffling on a variant of this problem. According to Husserl, on Sigwart's theory "[t]he judgment expressed in the formula of gravitation was not true before the time of Newton."<sup>4</sup> As the epigraph above shows, Husserl is sharply critical of Sigwart for not being more definitive on the question. In part I, I will argue that Husserl falls prey to the criticism he levels against Sigwart. Contra Derrida, he never takes a clear stand on whether an ideality pre-exists its originary intuiting.

Derrida thus irons out an irresolution in Husserl's views. In doing so, he leaves unclear how the originary intuition of an ideal object—"absolutely constitutive and creative", according to Derrida—is to be reconciled with the omnitemporality of the ideal object. In leaving this point unclear, I will argue in part 2, Derrida also fails to come to grips with the problem of prior sense, a failure which takes place in spite of his

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<sup>1</sup> I am not going to differentiate between phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology here for a number of reasons: Husserl is concerned with this problem from the beginning of his career. Derrida emphasizes continuity over discontinuity in Husserl's writings. The problem is inherent in the concept of *Sinnggebung*, and doesn't await Husserl's *Ideas*. Readers concerned about this may insert "transcendental" prior to phenomenology.

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Meillassoux has recently focused on this problem, which he calls the "ancestor problem", and tackled it directly. See Meillassoux, "Metaphysics, Speculation, Correlation," *Pli—Warwick Journal of Philosophy* (2011), pp. 1-24. He doesn't discuss the texts which I discuss in this paper, so I am postponing a discussion of his approach for another paper.

<sup>3</sup> None of the major books on Husserl and Derrida treat this problem. This is not a criticism of these books—their authors are interested in other matters. See Paola Marrati, *Genesis and Trace—Derrida Reading Husserl and Heidegger* (Stanford, 2005); Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl—The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Indiana, 2002); Joshua Kates, *Essential History—Jacques Derrida and the Development of Deconstruction* (Northwestern, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> *Logical Investigations*, I, trans. Findlay (Routledge, 1970), p. 150.

engagement with the issue in his treatment of Husserl's "Origin of Geometry". The avoidance of the problem announced in *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* (quoted in the other epigraph<sup>5</sup>) was actually continued through his career.

The ambiguity in Derrida's thought will be established (also in part II) through considering three ways that the omnitemporality of idealities could be reconciled with their non-existence prior to their first intuiting. These views are not abstractions, but philosophical views stated in texts which Derrida knew or probably knew. The significance of these texts and Derrida's failure to discuss them will be considered in the conclusion.

## I.

In his introduction to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry", Derrida claims the superiority of Husserl over Kant in that Husserl grounds transcendental historicity in concrete experience. According to Derrida, Husserl differs from Kant in that, for Husserl geometrical objects<sup>6</sup> do not pre-exist the founding moment, the "instituting origin" of geometry. "...the inaugural mutation which interests Kant *hands over* geometry rather than creates it; it sets free a possibility, which is nothing less than historical, in order to hand it to us. At first this 'revolution' is only a 'revelation for' the first geometer. It is not produced by him. ...Undoubtedly, Husserl's production (*Leistung*) also involves a stratum of receptive intuition. But what matters here is that this Husserlian intuition, as it concerns the ideal objects of mathematics, is absolutely constitutive and creative: the objects or objectivities that it intends did *not* exist *before* it..."<sup>7</sup> Derrida's reading of Husserl is unequivocal: the ideal objects of mathematics did not exist prior to their first, productive intuiting.

We can consider this as the problem of prior sense. I use the latter term because it has the broadest and most fundamental meaning for Husserl. Its breadth includes objects, "objectivities", idealities, and truths. The various questions set forth at the opening of this paper—some considered by Husserl, others by other philosophers I will discuss—will arise under this heading in the course of this paper. Neither Husserl nor Derrida differentiates between these in treating this problem, so I will not do so here. Because what is ultimately at stake here is the status of transcendental idealism, the last

<sup>5</sup> The "idea" referred to in the quote is the idea of philosophy; in the passage from which the parenthetical remark is drawn, Derrida is talking about how the idea of philosophy only comes to itself completely with the idea of phenomenology. He excludes the issue of the world prior to the origin.

<sup>6</sup> And all 'objectivities', a concept which would include equations and numbers and states-of-affairs and melodies, as well as ideal shapes.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, "Introduction", in Husserl, *L'origine de geometrie* (PUF, 1962), pp. 22-23; Leavey trans. (Nebraska, 1989), pp. 39-40.

of these questions will be of particular interest: Did time pass before there were human beings?

The problem is that Husserl never specifically says that geometrical objectivities do not pre-exist the proto-geometer's originary intuition of them.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, he seems to say quite the opposite since he states that they are omnitemporal, and 'all times' would include times prior to the first formulation of geometry. Given this apparent contradiction, and given Husserl's awareness of the problem of prior sense, I think it is reasonable that we only attribute a specific view to Husserl on this point if we find an explicit statement by him.

Nevertheless, Derrida's interpretation has much going for it. First, it is of the greatest interest to Husserl in the "Origin" that the proto-geometer's act is "creative", and refers to him as the "inventor" and "creator" of geometry. Additionally, in the "Origin", he specifically includes mathematical and scientific achievements as cultural productions—along with literature and artworks. Second, Husserl repeatedly uses the word "*erzeugen*" or "production" in referring to the origin of geometry. If we focus on the word "*erzeugen*", we could build an argument that Husserl changed his view on this point. While in the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl says that numbers are not touched by temporality or contingency<sup>9</sup>, we should note that also in the *Logical Investigations* (in the discussion of temporality raised by Sigwart), Husserl says that the concept or content of a presentation "can be meant, but not produced (*erzeugt*)".<sup>10</sup> In his later writings, *erzeugen* is Husserl's favored word for treating the constitution of idealities. Third, Derrida is correct in saying that Husserl wants to establish that every objectivity has a history.

I see a number of very solid reasons for challenging each of the three reasons offered in support of Derrida's interpretation. I will discuss each in turn.

<sup>8</sup> I am only concerned here with what Husserl explicitly says. Phenomenologists will no doubt immediately consider what he should have said, and how he would have treated the various questions grouped here under the problem of prior sense. This could be worthwhile for other purposes, but for my purposes here, I believe it is more fruitful to consider why he didn't thematise this problem.

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, he says that the number five is an "*ideal form-species*, which is absolutely one in the sense of arithmetic, whatever mental act it may be individuated for us in an intuitively constituted collective, a species which is untouched by the contingency, temporality and transience of our mental acts. Acts of counting arise and pass away and cannot be meaningfully mentioned in the same breath as numbers." *Logical Investigations* I, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> *Logical Investigations* I, p. 151. "*Es kann im Denken gemeint, aber nicht im denken erzeugt sein.*" *Logische Untersuchungen* (Meiner, 2009), p. 138. (Although Derrida argues for the continuity of Husserl's thought in *Speech and Phenomena*, the claim that Husserl changed his view on this point would fit in with Derrida's comment in *Problem of Genesis* that Husserl came to understand contingency better over the course of his writing.)

### 1. *Creative*

With regard to the first, it is worth noting that Husserl was also concerned in *Experience and Judgment* with establishing that “categorical objectivities”—states of affairs and sets, primarily, but also mathematics—were the result of “creative achievement”, yet there he says that irreal objects are valid prior to their “discovery”—Husserl’s scare-quotes:

Objectivities of the understanding make their appearance in the world (a state of affairs is ‘discovered’) as irreal; after having been discovered, they can be thought of anew and as often as desired and, in general, can be objects of experience according to their nature. But afterwards we say: even before they were discovered, they were already ‘valid’; or we say that they can be assumed—provided that subjects which have the ability to produce them are present and conceivable—to be producible precisely at any time, and that they have this mode of omnipresent existence: in all possible modes of production they would be the same. Similarly, we say: ‘there are’ mathematical and other irreal objects which no one has yet constructed. Their existence, to be sure is revealed only by their construction (their ‘experience’), but the construction of those already known opens in advance a horizon of objects capable of being further discovered, although still unknown.”<sup>11</sup>

The various hedges, combined with the unusual circumstances involved in the writing of the book, make it impossible to give a definitive reading of this passage. But the passage suggests it is possible that the production of ideal objects is not inconsistent with their being a discovery, as Husserl uses the term both in scare-quotes and without them. The comments are framed in terms of what “we say”, but nowhere in the section, or indeed, in the book does he return in order to disavow these claims. In the very next page, Husserl makes the claim of the omnitemporality of categorical objectivities on the basis of their supertemporality, and the passage above appears to be taken as having established that basis. Finally, the qualification concerning the abilities of subjects (“provided that subjects which have the ability to produce them are present and conceivable”) imports into the quotation exactly the same problem that we are exploring, but since it leaves open what is meant by “ability”, “present”, “conceivable”, it cannot be said to resolve it.

Following up the question of whether geometry should be said to be discovered, produced, created, or invented, the use of the terms *Leistung* or *Schöpfung* are not as conclusive as they may sound. This production is an intentional act, from the very beginning one has had to be cautious in drawing conclusions about intentionality from the terms used by Husserl to characterize it. Husserl himself cautions in the *Logical Investigations* that an intentional act is not an activity: “In talking of ‘acts’, on the other

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<sup>11</sup> *Experience and Judgment*, trans. Churchill and Ameriks (Northwestern, 1973), sec. 64c, p. 260.

hand, we must steer clear of the word's original meaning: *all thought of activity must be rigidly excluded.*" Husserl adds a footnote to this sentence, the conclusion of which says: "We too reject the 'mythology of activities': we define 'acts' as intentional experiences, not as mental activities."<sup>12</sup>

Objects pre-exist their constitution for an ego, in spite of what one would ordinarily think is implied by the word constitution. Would it also be a mistake to infer from the use of the terms "production" (in addition to *Leistung*, Husserl uses the term *erzeugen*) and "creation", which are stressed by Husserl in the "Origin" and the *Crisis*, that the objects "produced" and "created" did not pre-exist their production and creation? As eminent a Husserl scholar as Paul Ricoeur thought so: "But as we have said above, this 'creating' is so little a 'making' in the mundane sense that it is a 'seeing.' Here I agree with G. Berger..."<sup>13</sup>

Husserl does include the origin of geometry, along with creation of art, as matters of cultural productions, but he also differentiates them. He only notes one difference between them—that unlike literary works, objective sciences can be translated into foreign languages with identical (authentic, direct) accessibility.<sup>14</sup> Although this difference is unrelated to temporality, it indicates that Husserl doesn't identify them in all respects and that the possibility that they also differ in their temporality is not excluded. While this discussion in the "Origin" is quite suggestive, it is not determinative.

## 2. *Erzeugen*

Husserl refers to the origin of geometry as an "*Erfindung*" (invention) and, more often an "*Erzeugung*" in the "Origin" essay. There are two problems with building one's argument on these terms. First, they don't fit well together because they have a somewhat different meaning, a difference of some importance for this issue at hand. The type/token distinction is embedded in these terms; it would seem to be found in common German. Here I will merely rely on my Wahrig *Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. "*Erfinden*" is defined as applying to "something not yet available; something totally new, especially technology." The example given is "*Edison hat die Glühlampe erfunden.*" Husserl does use this term in the "Origin of Geometry", but his preferred term is *erzeugen*, which is defined in two ways, with regard to the production (1) of *etwas* or (2) of *eine Sache*. Re *etwas*: "bring forth, produce, manufacture, esp. agricultural

<sup>12</sup> *Logical Investigations*, vol. II, Investigation 5, sec. 13, p. 563.

<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, *Husserl*, trans. Ballard and Embree (Northwestern, 1967), p. 27n. 19.

<sup>14</sup> *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. Carr (Northwestern, 1970), p. 357; *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transcendentale Phänomenologie*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by Biemel (Nijhoff, 1962), p. 368.

products.” The examples: to produce more milk, eggs than last year, more goods, machines; more electricity, gas. Re *Sache*: “allow to arise, call forth, cause”. The examples: The sun produces warmth; to produce boredom, anxiety, mistrust.

So production (*erzeugen*) involves the creation of a particular that did not exist before, but of a type that did exist before. Invention (*erfinden*) involves the creation of a type of thing which did not exist before. On Husserl’s view of ideality, an ideality is one where the type/token distinction breaks down. Thus I do not think we can draw any conclusions simply from Husserl’s use of these words. Husserl would need to have discussed these words and their relation to the issue of temporality explicitly. His failure to do so I believe shows an avoidance of the issue.

The second problem with basing an argument is that Husserl does not use “*erzeugen*” for the first time in the “Origin” essay. He is already referring to the intending of idealities with this term in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* and *Experience and Judgment*.<sup>15</sup> The most important passage is in the *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (§63) where Husserl explains the sense of the phrase “production of logical formations”. This passage is highly suggestive of Ricoeur’s and Berger’s interpretation noted above. It aligns “*Erzeugung*” with “perception”, rather than creation. “Perception” is supplied with quotation marks, but nevertheless:

...they [ideal objectivities] are what they are, only “as coming from” an original production. But that is not at all to say that they are what they are, only *in* and *during* the original production. That they are “in” the original production signifies that they are intended to in it, as a certain intentionality having the form of *spontaneous activity*, and more particularly in the mode of belonging to the *original objectivity itself*. *This manner of givenness—givenness as something coming from such original activity—is nothing other than the sort of “perception” proper to them*. Or, what is the same thing, this originally acquiring activity is the “*evidence*” *appropriate to these idealities*. Evidence, quite universally... This evident-making activity of consciousness—in the present case a spontaneous activity that is hard to explore—is the “original constitution”, stated more pregnantly, the primally institutive constitution, of ideal objectivities of the sort with which logic is concerned. (p. 168)

This entire section of FTL deserves careful consideration, but for the moment, I can only note that here, unlike in his discussion of Sigwart in the *Logical Investigations*, intention and production are no longer contrasted. Second, even if we don’t place too much weight on the word “perception”, Husserl is most concerned here with aligning “production” with “evidence”, which tends to diminish the likelihood that the term “production” means prior non-existence.

<sup>15</sup> The discussion of the temporality of idealities in *Experience and Judgment* is ambiguous.



### 3. *History*

Turning now to the third reason--Derrida's reliance on Husserl's desire to establish that every objectivity has a history. It may be that Husserl's view changed on the specific point at issue here, but I would tend to agree with Derrida's tendency in interpreting Husserl as in general maintaining consistency through his writings.<sup>16</sup> In addition to discussions of mathematics and logic, Husserl treats the problem in occasional references to geology and paleontology, and these references suggest that Husserl did not change his views during his career. In these references, Husserl accepts at face value their claims concerning descriptive statements about times prior to the origin of human beings. In the *Logical Investigations*, he relies on this point in his argument against anthropologism: "No one has in fact ever thought of rejecting as *absurd* those geological and physical theories which give the human race a beginning and end in time."<sup>17</sup> In the *Crisis*, Husserl qualifies geology and paleontology as achieved mediately, yet still accepts them as descriptive sciences: "Thus geology and paleontology are 'descriptive sciences' even though they reach into climatic periods of the earth in which the analogous intuitions of inductively inferred living beings cannot in principle represent possible experience."<sup>18</sup> The quotation marks could be interpreted as scare-quotes, challenging the designation of these sciences as descriptive; but they could just as well be plain quotation marks, appealing to what is commonly accepted as support, just as Husserl does in other passages already quoted. If he has changed his view from the *Logical Investigations* on truth, he doesn't say so here.

Additional light is shed on Husserl's views of the historicity of science by two closely related passages in "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science":

The 'idea' of *Weltanschauung* is consequently a different one for each time, a fact that can be seen without difficulty from the preceding analysis of its concept. The 'idea' of science, on the contrary, is a supratemporal one, and here that means limited by no relatedness to the spirit of one time. Now, along with these differences go essential differences of practical orientations. After all, our life goals are in general of two kinds, some temporal, others eternal, some serving our own perfection and that of our own contemporaries, others the perfection of posterity, too, down to the most remote generations. Science is a title standing for absolute, timeless values. Every such value, once discovered, belongs thereafter to the treasure trove of all succeeding humanity and obviously

<sup>16</sup> Derrida opens *Speech and Phenomena* with this point. *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. Allison (Northwestern, 1973), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Logical Investigations*, vol. I, p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> *Crisis*, p. 239. The views expressed here do not differ from those in the "Origin of Geometry".

determines the material content of the idea of culture, wisdom, *Weltanschauung* philosophy.<sup>19</sup>

This passage shows Husserl's concern with making science—and rigorous philosophy—an acquisition which is true once and for all, and which determines culture rather than vice versa. It is of the utmost concern to Husserl that science (including mathematics and rigorous philosophy) not be temporally limited. In this particular passage, it is unclear whether the origin of ideal objects which Derrida attributes to Husserl in his reading of the “Origin” would be acceptable; the origin in a concrete action is a limit, but one which affects the past and not the future.<sup>20</sup> But it would seem that Husserl rejects this possibility a bit further on:

All ‘wisdom’ or wisdom doctrine whose origin is mathematical or in the realm of natural science has, to the extent that the corresponding theoretical doctrine has been given an objectively valid foundation, forfeited its rights. Science has spoken; from now on, it is for wisdom to learn. The striving toward wisdom in the realm of natural science was not, so to speak, unjustified before the existence of strict science; it is not retroactively discredited for its own time. In the urgency of life that in practice necessitates adopting a position, man could not wait until—say, after even supposing that he already knew the idea of strict science at all.<sup>21</sup>

When judging intellectual endeavors and the statements issued from them prior to the advent of science, Husserl would not condemn them. However, on Derrida's view the question of condemnation would be ruled out on the ground that science and mathematics were not true prior to their origin. In contrast, Husserl withholds condemnation on the basis of standard moral excuses—urgency of action and ignorance.

In considering his trajectory, we should consider what it is that Husserl wants to establish with the claim that every objectivity has a history. In his later writings, Husserl is responding to Heidegger, showing that phenomenology is ‘relevant’ to the individual and to current issues. He is staking out Heidegger's territory—history, tradition, culture—and trying to show that phenomenology as he conceived of it can cover these areas. This shift involved a shift of emphasis. Phenomenology had always had an “ego-pole” and an “object-pole”. Husserl's turn toward culture allowed him to work the subjective side. Previously, he had emphasized the object side and objectivity pursuant to his attempts to combat historicism and psychologism. For example, in “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science”, he emphasizes phenomenology's alliance with

<sup>19</sup> Husserl, *Shorter Works*, edited by McCormick and Elliston (Notre Dame, 1981), p. 191.

<sup>20</sup> The question of why it should not affect the future would perhaps be a cause of worry.

<sup>21</sup> Husserl, *Shorter Works*, p. 192.

and continuity with science. He reserves marking phenomenology's distance from science until the very end of the essay. Throughout his writings, Husserl's take on the accumulation of knowledge—e.g., the historicity of science—remains the same: knowledge as acquisition, permanent possession, evidence, tradition, sedimentation and re-animation. In establishing that objectivities have a history, he is concerned with establishing this picture of the accumulation of knowledge. The question of the pre-existence of those objectivities prior to their discovery or production is simply not one which he wishes (or is able) to tackle in the "Origin".<sup>22</sup>

## II.

Suppose we accept Derrida's interpretation of Husserl. In that case, he must be seen as making explicit a point which is not clearly made by Husserl. And although Derrida here helps to clarify Husserl, there remains an apparent contradiction in the "Origin". Now we have to reconcile the prior non-existence of idealities with their omnitemporality. "All times" would seem to include times prior to the origin.

The question of the temporality of geometry comes up near the beginning of the essay, and then returns at the end. First, Husserl says: "Indeed, it has, from its primal establishment, an existence which is peculiarly supertemporal and which—of this we are certain—is accessible to all men, first of all to the actual and possible mathematicians of all peoples, all ages; and this is true of all its particular forms."<sup>23</sup> Although it would be natural to read this quote with an implied "subsequent" inserted in the phrases "all people" and "all ages", without this clarification one can also read it as avoiding the issue. The question would be: what about the people who lived and the ages which passed prior to the origin of geometry? We might look to the end of the essay where the same issue of temporality arises. Here we find in close proximity

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<sup>22</sup> I don't think there is any way to attribute a definite view to Husserl on this point. Husserl's avoidance stems from issues related to his treatment of temporality and his concerns with science. Regarding temporality, Husserl's problem arises out of fundamental problems in phenomenology and in Husserl's treatment of time, which go far beyond the paradoxes which Derrida highlights in his treatment of Husserl's texts. One need only try to reconcile Husserl's point in *Experience and Judgment* that all individuation is only possible "on the basis of absolute temporal position" (p. 173) with the remainder of his account of time, which privileges inner time-consciousness. (Or with his priority of what is known immediately or immediately experienceable, as evidenced by the quote from the *Crisis* on geology and paleontology.) Fundamental as this point is, though, Husserl never took it to be a refutation of phenomenology. It surfaces occasionally, as shown in the above quotes, but Husserl seems to me to be avoiding it in the "Origin". With regard to science, as noted above, Husserl has the utmost concern throughout his career with establishing that scientific achievements are permanent acquisitions. He simply doesn't care much about their status prior to their first formulation.

<sup>23</sup> Husserl, "Origin of Geometry" *Crisis*, p. 356.

two quotes which, assuming that we interpret the first as Derrida does, make the contradiction apparent:

It is evident in advance that this new sort of construction will be a product [*Erzeugnis*] arising out of an idealizing, spiritual act, one of “pure” thinking, which has its materials in the designated general pregivens of this factual humanity and human surrounding world and creates [*schafft*] “ideal objects” out of them. (“Origin of Geometry”, in *Crisis*, pp. 376-7)

It is a general conviction that geometry, with all its truths, is valid with unconditioned generality for all men, all times, all peoples, and not merely for all historically factual ones but for all conceivable ones. The presuppositions of principle for this conviction have never been explored because they have never been seriously made a problem.” (p. 377)

The apparent contradiction is striking. On the one hand, ideal objects were ‘created’ and thus did not pre-exist their intellectual origin, nor did the truths about them. On the other hand, the truths of geometry held for all times, including those prior to their intellectual origin.

I will examine three ways of resolving the apparent contradiction. In the first two, we alter the meaning of “omnitemporality”, while in the third we import one of Derrida’s concepts. Along with each proposal, I will discuss a text that makes a very closely related claim. Each is a text that Derrida knew or probably knew. At this point, I am less interested in Husserl’s views than on Derrida’s. It strikes me as quite problematic that Derrida never addressed any of these texts.

a) *Change the meaning of ‘omni’: ‘all times’ means ‘all subsequent times’.*

When Husserl says that what is important for him is that the ‘ideal construction’ can be “understood for all future time and by all coming generations of men” (p. 377), this is not to be taken to be consistent with the omnitemporality of geometry.<sup>24</sup> Instead it would be a limitation or modification of the meaning of the ‘omni’ in omnitemporality, likewise for the ‘all’ in ‘all men’. Each such mention in Husserl’s text should be read as implicitly meaning ‘all subsequent times’ and ‘all subsequent people’. This interpretation neatly solves the problem with regard to geometry as well as the existence of the sun, although it does leave us hanging with regard to the question of whether time passed before there were human beings.

I associate this resolution with a particular text of Georges Bataille. At the beginning of a talk Bataille gave in the 1951, the first of his *Conferences sur Non-savoir*, he

<sup>24</sup> Nor would we be reading it as raising an unresolved inconsistency. That is the reading I propose in part one; here I am assuming that the inconsistency is merely apparent.

expressed exasperation about an opinion that A.J. Ayer had expressed during a drinking session the previous night. Ayer had stated as unquestionably obvious that the sun existed before there were human beings:

In the end, we had the opportunity to talk about a fairly strange question. Ayer asserted this very simple proposition: the sun existed before man. And he couldn't even doubt it. It so happened that Merleau-Ponty, Ambrosino (a physician), and myself were not of the same mind on this proposition, and Ambrosino said that certainly the sun had not existed before the world. For my part, I don't see how anyone can say that. This is a proposition that indicates the perfect non-sense that a reasonable proposition can assume. ...

I must say that yesterday's conversation was a scandal. There is a sort of abyss between French philosophers and English philosophers, which isn't there between French philosophers and German philosophers.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Bataille is talking about the sun, not geometry. But the passage raises the same issues of temporality, idealism, and description. Bataille's position here seems exceptionally strange given his polemics against Andre Breton, in which he accused Breton of idealism. It turns out that Bataille could only accept that the meaning of the world was parody and excrement if that meaning was conferred by human beings.<sup>26</sup>

Did Derrida read this talk? This question is not as easy as to answer as it might appear. The editorial notes in Bataille's *Oeuvres Complètes* can be misleading, as it says that *Tel Quel* published the original manuscripts of the lectures (VIII: 558).<sup>27</sup> Derrida cites the *Conférences sur nonsavoir* extensively in his essay on Bataille of 1967, but Bataille's talk was not published in *Tel Quel* in 1962 with the other talks on *nonsavoir*. Although it was not included in the original publication, Derrida would have had access to it in the offices of *Tel Quel* due to his connections with Sollers and the *Tel Quel* group. If he had known about it, he would have read it.

<sup>25</sup> Georges Bataille, "The Consequences of Nonknowledge," in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, edited by Stuart Kendall, translated by Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minnesota, 2001), pp. 111-112. For interesting context regarding this meeting, see Andreas Vrahimis, "Was There a Sun Before We Existed?" A.J. Ayer and French Philosophy in the Fifties," *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 9 (2012): 1-25.

<sup>26</sup> This judgment is supported by a number of passages in *L'expérience intérieure* and *Le Coupable*. See for example p. 68 of the "Collection tel" edition of *L'expérience intérieure* (Gallimard, 1954) on the object as a projection of the subject (trans. p. 54). There are also passages pointing to the opposite conclusion, such as on pp. 83-4 of the same work regarding the material precarity of the subject.

<sup>27</sup> Regarding the specific talk in question, the editors say "*Nous ne retrouvons cet exposé qu'une transcription dactylographée [Boîte 16, C 10-20], non publiée par 'Tel Quel.'*" In order to confirm the suggestion that this talk was not published at all by *Tel Quel*, one needs to fill in the gaps and note that not only did the editors of *OC* not have a manuscript, neither did the editors of *Tel Quel*. Thus they published the manuscripts of the talks for which they had a manuscript.

I think that it is highly likely that he did know about it. In his Bataille essay, Derrida also cites two of Bataille's unpublished writings, the "Vielle Taupe" essay and the Theory of Religion.<sup>28</sup> Given that the "Vielle Taupe" essay was published in 1968 in *Tel Quel*, I think that it is reasonable to conclude that he obtained it from *Tel Quel*. Knowing that he read at least one unpublished essay in *Tel Quel*'s files and given his interest in *nonsavoir* and in Bataille's unpublished writings in general, he would have read any other such writings in the files of the review. The fact that he doesn't cite this passage hardly counts as evidence against his knowing it, as will be established by his failure to cite or discuss the passages discussed below which he unquestionably knew.

*b) Change the meaning of 'temporality' in 'omnitemporality'*

For Husserl, time has a special connection to the origin of geometry. By focusing on this connection we can offer a second way of resolving the apparent contradiction in Derrida's interpretation of Husserl. In "The Origin of Geometry", Husserl says:

As a philosopher proceeding from the practical, finite surrounding world (of the room, the city, the landscape, etc., and temporally the world of periodic occurrences: day, month, etc.) to the theoretical world-view and world-knowledge, he has the finitely known and unknown spaces and times as finite elements within the horizon of an open infinity. But with this he does not yet have geometrical space, mathematical time, and whatever else is to become a novel spiritual product out of these finite elements which serve as material;..." (p. 376)

One might posit that there is a transformation in time itself with the origin of geometry, and that what came before was a finite, inexact time. And if infinite, mathematical time is time in the true sense, then one can say that there was no time prior to the creation of geometry. The question of whether geometrical objects pre-existed their creation does not arrive because there can be no question of "pre-existence", of a true "before". This may seem like a stretch, especially if we shift the question: Did time pass before there were human beings? On the view that I'm setting forth with this alternative, the answer would be no.

As bizarre as such a view seems to common sense and scientific discourse, this would be in no way an unusual position for phenomenology, and it is indeed the view that Heidegger explicitly puts forth in *Introduction to Metaphysics*:

After all, there was a time when there were no human beings. But strictly speaking, we cannot say there was a time when there were no human beings. At

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<sup>28</sup> See, respectively, the footnotes on pages 401 and 403 of *L'Écriture et la différence* (Seuil, 1967).

every time, there were and are and will be human beings, because time temporalizes itself only as long as there are human beings.<sup>29</sup>

There is a close parallel here between Heidegger's and Husserl's view here, because Heidegger states that an understanding of Being is necessary to our being human. So the question of whether time passes prior to there being humans has the same ambiguity for Heidegger as the question of whether time passed prior to the origin of geometry for Husserl. In each case there is an event which would normally be taken as historical but is instead claimed to be the opening onto history; for Heidegger that event would be the *Seinsverstehen* of the Presocratics, rather than the origin of geometry. Then the question can be pushed farther, asking if time passed before there were human beings, before there were sentient beings, before planets had cooled? Without the passing of time, it becomes difficult to make sense of these questions and distinguish these 'befores' and these (supposed non-)events. I think it is quite disconcerting that Derrida never discussed this passage, especially given his indebtedness to Heidegger on matters concerning time.<sup>30</sup>

c) *Bring in Derrida's concept of nachträglichkeit or retroactivity.*

This is seemingly the most Derridean way of resolving the apparent conflict. Until the origin of geometry, the geometrical objects did not yet exist. But their pre-existence is retroactive or *nachträglich*; even though they did not exist up to the origin, nevertheless, after the origin they *will have existed* prior to the origin. This 'past which was never present' fits Derrida's concept exactly. And we know that the concept applies outside of the psychoanalytic context in which Derrida first elucidates it (Freud essay), as Derrida uses it in such a way in *Of Grammatology*. There, though, Derrida uses it to show that the 'origin' is a retroactive effect of what comes later; he never uses it in the case of what comes before the origin.<sup>31</sup>

Curiously, there is a philosopher who squarely faces the question with which we are dealing—and relied on *nachträglichkeit* to deal with the problem, although he did not use the word. This philosopher wrote before Derrida, before Heidegger, and before Husserl. It was Schopenhauer who considered whether there was time before there were knowers, and said that there was no time until there was a knower, after which

<sup>29</sup> *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Polt and Fried (Yale, 2000), pp. 88-89.

<sup>30</sup> It hardly needs noting that Derrida was thoroughly familiar with *Introduction to Metaphysics*, but for those who would like references, Derrida cites the book more than once in "*Violence et Métaphysique*" in *L'Écriture et la différence*. See the footnotes on pages 206, 209, and 214.

<sup>31</sup> Interesting, *nachträglichkeit* is discussed by Lacan in the first lecture of his seminar on "*Le moi*" on November 17, 1954. See *Le Séminaire livre II: Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* (Seuil, 1978), pp. 11-23. This idea may have had a general currency in Paris by the time Derrida published his translation of Husserl's "Origin of Geometry".

*there had been* time. Schopenhauer places this originary moment (perhaps) with an insect:

...each more highly organized state of matter succeeded in time a cruder state. Thus animals existed before men, fishes before land animals, plants before fishes, and the inorganic before that which is organic; consequently, the original mass had to go through a long series of changes before the first eye that opened, were it even that of an insect.<sup>32</sup>

Schopenhauer explicitly states the problem as a contradiction between the need for “that long course of time” prior to knowing, and his view that time does not pre-exist knowing: “But without that eye, in other words, outside of knowledge, there was no before, no time.” (p. 31) He then notes that the first moment of time projects backward an infinite past: “...time with its whole infinity in both directions is also present in the first knowledge.” (p. 31) “Accordingly the past, out of which the first present arises, is, like it, dependent on the knowing subject, and without this it is nothing. It happens of necessity, however, that this first present does not manifest itself as the first, in other words, as having no past for its mother, and as being the beginning of time; but rather as the consequence of the past according to the principle of being in time...” (p. 31)

Derrida never mentions this text, nor to my knowledge has anyone writing on Derrida. One would of course presume that Derrida would have read *The World as Will and Representation*. Confirmation is found in his “Introduction” itself, as Schopenhauer is not completely absent from Derrida’s reading of Husserl’s “Origin”. The first philosopher Derrida mentions in the footnotes to his Introduction to Husserl’s OG, other than Husserl and philosophers discussing Husserl, is Schopenhauer. Derrida goes out of his way to let us know that Husserl’s concept of *Gegenständlichkeit* “is not in any sense tied to Schopenhauer’s concept of *Objectität*.” (p. 12, n. 4; trans., pp. 32-33)<sup>33</sup> This reference is, for all practical purposes, a reference to *The World as Will and Representation*. The index to Suhrkamp’s edition of Schopenhauer’s *Sämtliche Werke* lists four mentions of *Objectität*, three of which are in that book.

### III

When time was at issue, Husserl had a tendency to work out theories which fell victim to the very objections he himself had previously posed against the theories of others.

<sup>32</sup> *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. Payne (Dover, 1969), p. 30. Schopenhauer, as the conditional tense suggests, is actually noncommittal on whether the first knower was an insect, as he goes on to talk about the “first knowing animal”.

<sup>33</sup> Schopenhauer’s name, however, will not be found in the index to the English translation.



In his book on Husserl, Nicholas de Warren has noted two such cases.<sup>34</sup> I have argued that a third example is to be found in the problem of prior sense. Husserl's failure to come to a clear answer to the problem, after posing such a failure as an objection to Sigwart, should lead phenomenologists to rethink the authority they grant Husserl's writings on time. If they believe the *nachträglich* view is the solution, then they should consider why Husserl initially thought that the realist view was obviously correct, and why he was not only never able to unequivocally commit to an anti-realist view, but also, on at least some occasions, continued to think that the realist view was obvious to the end, as shown by his remark on geology and paleontology.

Does the argument made here pose a problem for deconstruction? We have seen that Derrida never discusses the three texts which are central to the problem of prior sense, even though he definitely knew of two and probably knew of the third. What are we to make of Derrida's failure to discuss these texts? I can imagine a number of responses to this analysis, but I wish to highlight what I take to be two possible implications for deconstruction.

First, we might take it as a challenge to Derrida's awarding of a privileged position to phenomenology in the founding of deconstruction. Derrida claims that Husserl made certain advances which were necessary for the advent of deconstruction. Derrida's claim that Husserl was the one who made an advance over Kant in the articulation of transcendental historicity on concrete experience must be revised. If this was one of those supposed advances, then we can reduce the status of phenomenology for deconstruction. All philosophy deconstructs itself, and phenomenology would have no privilege. Thus the first possible implication would distance deconstruction from transcendental idealism, whereas the alternative would tie the two much more closely together.

The second possible implication may pose a much more serious problem for deconstruction. Let's take Schopenhauer's text as our clue. "[T]his first present does not manifest itself as the first": this sounds like something Derrida could have said, or even something he did say: "the origin is not the origin". Within historical perspective, use of the concept of retroactivity here appears less to be a significant advance over Kant and more like an ad hoc adjustment of Kant's fundamentally ahistorical (and atemporal) philosophy necessitated by the fact that Kant never considered the fact that, or even the possibility that, human beings arose at a particular time. No phenomenological or deconstructive insights were needed for Schopenhauer to find this solution. Nor can it escape notice that Schopenhauer sees and articulates the problem more forthrightly than either Husserl does (on either my

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<sup>34</sup> *Husserl and the Promise of Time* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 134 and 135.

or Derrida's interpretation) or Derrida does. The treatment of this issue by Bataille and Heidegger show that no matter how far they were from Kant—and how far they conceived of themselves from being—they were still closely tied to Kant in terms of this problematic. As such, their theories wish to place something outside of time, and make that something more fundamental than time. Could it be that Derrida's theory is also too closely tied to Kantian idealism, and thus ends up, contrary to all of its intentions, effacing time and falling back into metaphysics?

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