Husserl vs. Derrida *

JAMES M. EDIE
Department of Philosophy, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60201

It is striking (and somewhat embarrassing) to observe that in the now very large literature devoted to the works of Jacques Derrida very little critical attention has been paid to the strictly philosophical import of either his interpretations of other philosophers or to the ultimate content of his own philosophy. Certainly we have a great body of texts from students, admirers, and followers of Derrida, particularly in this country, who almost uncritically accept and then attempt to repeat in similar idioms the things that he has said or is interpreted as having meant. But serious philosophical comment is very sparse, whether from the side of analytical Anglo-American philosophy or from the side of phenomenology. Of course, we have the very penetrating analysis and criticism of his thought presented by John Searle, but Searle is almost unique among analytical philosophers for paying any attention to Derrida at all, unless, like Richard Rorty, they have also already given up philosophy for a sociology of communication.

The lack of critical interest in Derrida’s thought on the part of Husserlian phenomenologists is more puzzling, in as much as one would expect a greater and more detailed interest in his criticisms of Husserl, from them. But, here again, we find that the more disciplined and mature Husserl scholars seem to pass his work over in silence while others who call themselves “continentalists” in a more general sense are likely simply to rest content with glorifying his supposed achievements. All too often what one first begins to read hopefully as a critical philosophical argument with Derrida ends with the simple conclusion that what other philosophers, or “the tradition,” or some text – taken for purposes of illustration – just lacks is the notion of la Différance, and that both ends the argument and the paper. In short, the number of “continental” philosophers who have written philosophically on Derrida is extremely small. Therefore, the time would

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seem ripe for some kind of preliminary assessment of what his critique of Husserl actually comes down to and of how it might be answered. Since I am taking the occasion of this memorial address in honor of Aron Gurwitsch to make these remarks, I must approach Derrida from a philosophical point of view and hold him to the rigorous demands which the spirit of Gurwitsch would require; in short, I have to put to his thought the properly philosophical questions: What does it mean? Is it true?

Derrida’s admirers and followers have the impression that his work began in a “counter-reading” of Husserl’s text, in order to squeeze out of it what Husserl was trying to hide or hedge in. Derrida himself is always, at least in his early works, very careful to emphasize his great respect for and indebtedness to Husserl and to acknowledge the greatness and originality of his thought, but there is no doubt that his intention was to seriously undermine certain key doctrines of Husserl’s phenomenology and to erect in their place a method of deconstruction based on the notion of differance. If one were to read only Derrida’s followers and admirers, who have produced the largest quantity of writing concerning his own prolific corpus now extant, one would certainly come away with the conclusion that he had thoroughly deconstructed not only the text of Husserl but his philosophical intentions as well and had revealed the innermost contradiction at the heart of Husserlian phenomenology, namely the secret adherence to a “bad” classical metaphysics of Being as presence. All of Derrida’s principal concepts center around this one discovery and result in, if not the suppression, at least the decentering of the subject, or the displacement of consciousness.

1. Consciousness/subjectivity

Now, since consciousness was, for Husserl, the Urtatsache, the wonder of all wonders, the fundamental fact, the starting point, the origin, to attack the privilege which Husserl gives to consciousness is to strike at the heart of phenomenology. This is certainly a complex matter and Derrida in his nuanced, brilliant, and strategically well organized discussion of Husserl never suggests that Husserl was unaware that consciousness has its contrary, namely the absence of consciousness or nonconsciousness. He, rather, attempts to deconstruct the sense which Husserl gave to consciousness and the subject. Derrida (1968:92) never completely renounces the subject since at least a “trace” of the subject always remains and he responded to his critics in the Société française de philosophie, when he first read his essay Différence before them, that he had, unlike the Structuralists, never denied the existence of the subject. But what exactly does it mean to say that in the last analysis only a trace of consciousness remains?