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## Philosophy of History in the Early Derrida

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### Abstract

The term “Deconstruction” is often used for naming Derrida’s philosophical approach. But his strategy seems to be complicated, and so it needs careful investigation based on his text. In this article, we are going to consider his philosophy of history particularly in his early age, because his main concern had been formed through his early phenomenological research. By comparing Derrida’s approach with other positions in the sphere of Husserl’s philosophy of history, we can understand Derrida’s philosophical strategy.

### 1. Two approaches in Derrida’s early work

Derrida paid attention to the topic of this history in Husserl’s phenomenology in his first work, *The problem of genesis in Husserl’s philosophy* [Derrida 2003]. He accomplished it as a dissertation at 1954, and after many years he published it in 1990. This book consists of four chapters with a long preface and a short introduction. This introduction is a résumé of the main text, but the preface seems to have character. In that preface, Derrida explains why he added it.

Originally these long preliminary considerations were not meant to introduce the present historical study. . . . We thought that it was perhaps right to present them here, insofar as they might throw some light on the historical

essay which is going to follow them [ibid. 182].

Even if this preface is useful for understanding his main text, we should be aware of the distinction between that preface and the following chapters, because this distinction turns out to be important when we compare Derrida's approach with others in the sphere of the philosophy of history.

For the first step, we can find the appreciation of the philosophy of history in Husserl's later work, particularly in the preface.

We propose to show that it is only from Husserl on, if not explicitly with him, that the great dialectical theme which animates and motivates the most powerful philosophical tradition, from Platonism to Hegelianism can be renewed, or if not renewed then at least rounded, authenticated, and completed [ibid. xxi].

This citation shows the respect of Derrida for the phenomenological method, and other parts included in the preface express a similar estimation.

By contrast, in the main text (from the introduction to the chapter four) following the preface he argues about Husserl's phenomenological approach in a different tone: in short, he denounces Husserl repeatedly. Derrida confessed a "disappointment" when he treated the phenomenological approach proposed by Husserl [ibid. 5].

Besides, as far as the topic of the Vienna lecture which was delivered by Husserl in 1935 is concerned, Derrida criticizes Husserl more severely. "The Vienna lecture, . . . starting out from an idea of history, constantly fails to give account of the actual genesis of this idea and of its historical rootedness [ibid. 160]".

Even though there is a difference between these citations, I don't want to interpret it as a simple contradiction, because in Derrida's thought there seems to have been a development that was concerned with the philosophy of history. Before examining this development, we have to deal with the problem of philosophy in the realm of history.

## **2. The criticism against historicism and the affirmation of history**

In Husserl's work, we can find the criticism against historicism, particularly in his early period. Husserl often pointed out the problem of historicism that should lead to skepticism or relativism. For example, he criticized historicism in *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science* [Husserl 1965a], considering *Weltanschauung* philosophy as relativism which would treat the historical life form as a relative one.

Of course, *Weltanschauung* and *Weltanschauung* philosophy are cultural

formations that come and go in the stream of human development, with the consequences that their spiritual content is definitely motivated in the given historical relationships. But the same is true of the strict sciences. Do they for that reason lack objective validity? A thoroughly extreme historicist will perhaps answer in the affirmative [ibid. 124].

We have to notice that he denounced historicism, not history itself. In my opinion, the criticism against historicism should be distinguished from the affirmation of history, because there seems to be an affirmation of history in his later works. Husserl placed importance on the philosophico-historical idea that was developed in Europe [Husserl 1965b]. By using the term “Europe”, he didn’t want to characterize the geographic feature which would appear on maps. Each scientific idea always shows itself as a valid law for everyone, at every time. Nevertheless, each scientific idea has a historical birth or genesis. And in this case, Husserl thought that the notion of a scientific idea had discovered by the ancient Greeks in Europe [Husserl 1965b: 158–159].

Husserl’s historical approach towards the scientific idea was not accepted by his contemporaries. Even some of the researchers of phenomenology would not appreciate his aim in the philosophy of history. Derrida seemed to share this view at least in his early stage. Therefore we are going to investigate the phenomenological study which includes comments to Husserl’s philosophy of history.

### **3. Evaluations of the late Husserl’s philosophy of history**

There were some articles that dealt with the philosophy of history in phenomenology. One of the earliest articles is the “The Work of Edmund Husserl” which was published in 1940 by E. Levinas [Levinas 1998]. In this article he appreciated Husserl’s logical thinking, but he didn’t like Husserl’s historical approach. The phenomenological philosophy in Husserl “testifies to his distrust of history as the condition of philosophy. . . . Thus, the mind, in Husserl, ultimately appears as foreign to history” [ibid. 71].

Besides this article, J. Cavailles, Tran-Duc-Tao, J.F. Lyotard were aware of the problem of history in phenomenology. They discussed that problem, but all of them rejected Husserl’s notion of history. The most important work in that age is the article written by P. Ricœur, “Husserl et le sens de l’histoire” [Ricœur 1948] which mentioned the problem of history. In this article Ricœur said that the problematic of transcendental philosophy seemed to exclude the historical interest by virtue of a preliminary operation, namely “Transcendental reduction”. Ricœur’s interest covered the the most parts of Husserl’s attempt in the philosophy of history, but

Ricœur showed a negative attitude to that approach in history at last.

It seems to me that the first positive estimation of Husserl's historical philosophy was presented by M. Merleau-Ponty. Because geometrical truth has to be discovered in history, history is a necessary aspect of every scientific idea. Philosophy itself is also formed by a scientific idea, it has a historical birthplace. Merleau-Ponty said, "where is the place of the philosophy? It is not in events, nor in the eternal. It takes place in history" [Merleau-Ponty 1975: 66–67].

These critical works of Husserl's philosophy except Lyorard's writing are included in the bibliography of Derrida's dissertation. On the ground that we can find different attitudes in these researches, one could conclude that Derrida was at a loss in the problem of history in phenomenology. But I would like to find another way to estimate the Derrida's position, considering his approach more closely.

#### **4. Derrida's interpretation and its developments**

Though Derrida rejected the Husserl's philosophy of history in chapter four of his dissertation, he didn't deny the motif of genesis in history at all. He insisted that scientific ideas or philosophy have their root in history, and that it should be understood "dialectically". "A new radical explicative, a new beginning, is necessary. It is from this indefinite necessity that genesis must be dialectically lived and understood"[Derrida 2003: 178]. So it is wrong to think that Derrida despised the role of history in philosophy. He attached importance to the "synthèse originaire" which was going to explicate the philosophy of history through a dialectical method. For that reason, he underestimated Husserl's approach.

After completing his dissertation, Derrida wrote another work which concerned Husserl's later work [Derrida 1962]. This is the long and complicated introduction to Husserl's short manuscript, "Origin of Geometry". In this work, Derrida argues that Husserl's historical approach is the authentic method for the explication of the philosophy of history. Because history or traditionality [traditionnalité] is a necessary factor for every scientific idea, self-awareness of historic reason — which was emphasized by Husserl — has a proper role in the sphere of the philosophy of history.

In the transition from the first work to the second one, we can find a difference which is related to the philosophy of history. On the one hand, traditionality was viewed as a simple and empirical phenomenon in his first work [Derrida 2003: 165]. On the other hand, traditionality played an important role that would be the possibility of every scientific activity in his second one. Derrida used the word "tradition" in two senses, i.e., transmission and heritage [Derrida 1962: 4]. Without them, we can't accept any scientific ideas from other people. Even if we can

discover a scientific data by ourselves, we can't transmit the content without the "tradition" that Derrida mentioned.

The difference between the former and the latter is not a simple contradiction. Traditionality itself is not an empirical phenomenon, nor an accidental event. It always has a delay, and a delay legitimates a retrospective research in the philosophy of history. Even when someone discovered a scientific idea, those appearances had to show themselves as valid even for his/her ancestors. Thus a delay that is included in any scientific idea is the absolute [Derrida 1962: 170]. This delay is explicitly named in the second work of Derrida, but in his first work he said that philosophical genesis should be understood by considering a "synthèse originaire" which would synthesize the ideal character of science and its historical birth. Even if he couldn't treat the "synthèse originaire" on a deeper level, we are able to see that his interest didn't change in the transition from the first to the second work, and that he developed his consideration by focusing on the historical approach.

## 5. Conclusion

It is difficult to find consistency in Derrida's early works. He seems to have changed his attitude, because we can notice some transitions elsewhere. One of the serious more alterations is to be found in his note added to the topic of "traditionality" [Derrida 2003: 212]. In that note, after he characterized tradition as an empirical event, he confessed he had written the phrase, "No. To revise!". This note may show his changed attitude, but this doesn't mean a simple contradiction. The need of a historical approach was conceded from the beginning by naming it a "synthèse originaire" which could connect a scientific idea to its historical birth. So we can understand that the alterations found in Derrida's early works were superficial ones, and that his strategy was only developed in the theory of history.

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