

Leaving a Trace in the World (II): Deconstruction and the History of Life

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There [in the trace] we have all history,
from what metaphysics has defined as
“non-living” up to “consciousness,”
passing through all levels of animal
organization.

--Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

Abstract: This article tests the hypothesis that the history of life can be told only by assuming the ultra-transcendental conception of life as leaving a trace in the world. It draws together two moments in the work of Jacques Derrida that are chronologically distant and yet develop that hypothesis and its consequences: the deconstruction of the phenomenological concept of consciousness, and the deconstruction of the Cartesian narrative of life. The article demonstrates that the first moment allows us to elaborate the ultra-transcendental conception of life presupposed by phenomenological consciousness, which offers new ways to analyze biological questions of the origin and evolution of life, and ethico-political questions of responsibility.

I.

In the passage from *Of Grammatology* (1967) chosen as the epigraph of this essay, Jacques Derrida draws a decisive implication from his formalization of the concept of the trace. The trace, as the most general possibility of repetition and thus as the common root of passive retention and active recollection, calls into question the distinction, if not the abyss,

conjured up by metaphysics between the living, qua consciousness, and the non-living, qua animals and machines, or animal-machines. This implication opens up the history of life, as leaving a trace in the world, and the history of its evolution, from the most elementary forms of living to consciousness. Therefore, Derrida argues, the deconstruction of metaphysics through the formula of the trace allows us to liberate the history of life: we can tell this history only by starting from the trace.

In the pages that follow, I put this argument to the test and point to its repercussions—for example, for ethico-political questions of responsibility—by focusing on two key moments in Derrida’s work: the deconstruction of the phenomenological concept of voice and the deconstruction of the so-called Cartesian conception of human auto-relation (autodeictic autotelicity). These moments are chronologically thirty years apart and yet, as we will see, are interwoven by Derrida himself in the act of sketching his intellectual autobiography.¹ As my reading develops, we understand that the liberation of the history of life is a consequence of the deconstruction of the metaphysical project at stake in phenomenology, which consists in dissimulating the entanglement of consciousness and the trace. From this deconstruction, it follows that we can only think of consciousness as an effect of the trace and that we must reinscribe within the liberated history of life metaphysical distinctions such as those between reaction and response, or between automation and freedom, which in turn hinge on the metaphysical concept of consciousness.

II.

Let us start by examining how, since his *first* deconstructive work, *Voice and Phenomenon* (1967; hereafter *VP*), Derrida allows himself to tell the history of life as leaving a trace in the world through the deconstruction of the phenomenological concept of voice.² This work engages a deconstructive reading of chapter one of *Logical Investigations I*, in

which Husserl elaborates the phenomenological concept of sign. Derrida takes this text as a privileged example for showing that the phenomenological critique of metaphysics constitutes the historical achievement of the originary metaphysical project.³ As he suggests, we can identify the central motif of this critique as the denunciation of metaphysical perversions in the understanding of the authentic mode of ideality. For Husserl, ideality consists in the form in which the presence of the object can be repeated indefinitely as identical to itself. By definition, this form does not exist (it is non-real, unreal, etc.) to the extent that it does not depend on an empirical or worldly existence.⁴ Now, Derrida goes on, the possibility of the ideal form and thus of the indefinite repetition of the presence of the object as identical to itself can be secured only in the presence of the living present or the self-presence of transcendental life. Therefore, for Husserl, the latter constitutes the ultimate form of ideality. Derrida summarizes this convergence of ideality, the living present, and transcendental life as follows:

So that the possibility of this repetition can be open *idealiter* to infinity, it is necessary that one ideal form secures this unity of the *indefinitely* and the *idealiter*: this is the present, or rather the presence of the *living present*. The ultimate form of ideality, the one in which in the last analysis we can anticipate or recall all repetition, the ideality of ideality is the *living present*, the self-presence of transcendental life. (VP 5-6)

The phenomenological concept of consciousness is structurally linked to the claim for an authentic mode of ideality. As the ideal form grants the presence of the object to consciousness, consciousness is determined by the very possibility of ideality and, ultimately, by the presence of the living present.⁵ Difficulties arise when Husserl allows that the ideal object is the historical product of a constitutive act of language and that consciousness consists in the possibility of this act. Does it follow from this that the element of consciousness and the element of language are indiscernible, and thus that the presence of

transcendental life is originally divided by the worldly and empirical synthesis of language? In Derrida's words, "is it not the case that their indiscernibility will introduce non-presence and difference (mediacy, the sign, referral, etc.) right into the heart of self-presence?" (VP 13). Derrida argues that Husserl addresses this difficulty by appealing to the concept of voice (*voix*). However, he explains, this difficulty does not represent a weakness immanent to the Husserlian system. Rather, although Husserl shares the appeal to voice with the whole history of metaphysics, his concept of phenomenological voice brings this history to its most refined achievement. Phenomenological voice, in fact, does not seem to require a worldly synthesis and thus would protect transcendental life from the threat of non-presence and difference implicit in the indiscernibility of language and consciousness. Derrida formalizes the Husserlian solution to metaphysical difficulty *par excellence* as follows: "Husserl will not recognize an originary affinity with the *logos* in general in the sonorous substance or in the physical voice, or in the body of the voice in the world; rather the originary affinity will be recognized in the phenomenological voice, in the voice in its transcendental flesh" (VP 14).

Derrida draws this concept of phenomenological voice from Husserl's well-known distinction between *Anzeichen*, the so-called index/indication, the sign that does not express anything because it does not convey meaning (*Bedeutung*), and *Ausdruck*, or expression.⁶ Voice designates the phenomenological situation in which this distinction is accomplished and expression is no longer entangled with indication. Given the irreducibility of this entanglement in worldly or empirical communication—for reasons that will appear evident in a moment—this situation can only be found "in a language without communication, in a monological discourse, in the absolutely lowest register of the voice of the 'solitary life of the soul'" (VP 19). Derrida explains that the condition for this situation is a certain relation to the ideal object, "the relation to the object, the aim of an objective ideality, over and against the intention of meaning [*vouloir-dire*], over and against the *Bedeutungsintention*" (VP 19). This

relation constitutes the phenomenological project in its essence—that is, the phenomenological idea of transcendental idealism.⁷ Disentangled and pure expression secures the exteriorization—still within consciousness and not in the world—of this relation to the object. There, as Derrida puts it, the voice animated by intention expresses the intended object.⁸

Derrida offers a close reading of the progressive reductions of indication by means of which Husserl delimits the access to pure expression. As these reductions develop, he points out that indication designates the fact that the animating intention present to itself in transcendental life (namely, *psychē* or spirit) goes out of itself and thus relates to non-presence, difference, and, ultimately, death. But this relation to death accounts for the very process of signification and, more precisely, of writing, the latter being the sign that works beyond and thanks to the absence of its animating intention. By reducing indication and thus, as we anticipated, by appealing to pure expression and phenomenological voice, Husserl wishes, according to Derrida, to dissimulate the relation to death that is at work in signs—namely, the originary and irreducible possibility of writing that Derrida designates as archi-writing. I quote this long passage as it constitutes a key moment in the deconstructive reading of the phenomenological concept of sign:

Pure expressivity will be the pure active intention (spirit, psyche, life, will) of a *bedeuten* that is animating a discourse whose content (*Bedeutung*) will be present. It is present not in nature, since indication alone takes place in nature and in space, but in consciousness. Therefore it is present to an “internal” intuition or to an “internal” perception. But we just understood why it is present to an intuition that is not that of the other in a case of communication. Therefore this is *self-present* in the life of a present that has still not exited from itself into the world, into space, into nature. With all of these “exitings” exiling this life of self-presence into indication, we can be sure

that indication, which covers so far nearly the entire surface of language, is the process of death at work in the signs. (VP 34)⁹

At this point, we wonder how phenomenological voice is supposed to respond to the difficulty of metaphysics—that is, to the threat of death implicit in the process of signification and thus in idealization. To what extent, as Derrida puts it, “between idealization and the voice, the complicity is here unfailing” (VP 64)? A medium is required to preserve the two features of authentic ideality: “the *presence of the object* in front of the intuition and the *presence to oneself*, the absolute proximity of the acts to themselves” (VP 65). This medium would be an exteriorization of transcendental life in which voice does not go out of itself and, therefore, does not undergo the work of death. But that seems to be precisely phenomenological voice in the way its phenomenon is given, in its proximity to the speaking subject in the present moment of enunciation.¹⁰ Phenomenological voice thus seems to account for a kind of auto-relation (for-itself, or subjectivity), that of the “I” hearing itself speak, which preserves the self-presence of transcendental life and for which Derrida takes recourse to the concept of auto-affection. “Why is the phoneme the most ‘ideal’ of signs?” (VP 66), Derrida asks. Because the being in the present of the phonic signifier retains the latter close to the animating intention, thus seeming to prevent it from going out of itself and relating to its death. Derrida writes:

The signifier that is animated by my breath and by the intention of signification (in Husserlian language the expression animated by the *Bedeutungsintention*) is absolutely close to to me. The living act, the act that gives life, the *Lebendigkeit* that animates the body of the signifier and transforms it into an expression that wants to say, the soul of language, seems not to separate itself from itself, from its presence to itself. The soul of language does not risk death in the body of a signifier abandoned to the world and to the visibility of space. (VP 66-67)¹¹

Therefore, phenomenological voice aims to respond to the difficulty represented by the indistinguishability of consciousness and language. The pure auto-affection of the I's hearing itself speak displays the very meaning of the term "con-sciousness"—that is, the possibility of the indefinite repetition of the object as identical to itself and, ultimately, the self-presence of transcendental life. "The voice is being close to itself in the form of universality, as consciousness. The voice *is* consciousness" (VP 68), Derrida argues. Pure auto-affection describes a non-real communication in which I hear the other speak as if it were me. "To speak to someone [in what is understood as the phenomenological speech or voice]," he goes on, "is to make the other *repeat immediately* in himself the hearing-oneself-speak in the very form in which I have produced it" (VP 68). Finally, we come to the reading of the phenomenological concept of consciousness as pure auto-affection. This concept—evoked by Derrida in the epigraph of this essay—grounds the metaphysical distinction between the living and the non-living and thus opens up the abyss between consciousness and the other forms of life, foreclosing the history of life. In the subsequent pages of his book, Derrida deconstructs this concept by demonstrating that we must think auto-affection from the trace—that is, from the most general possibility of signification. Idealization cannot be dissociated from the process of death at work in signs and thus from the originary and no longer reducible possibility of writing, or *archi-writing*.¹²

Phenomenological voice is the most ideal of signs, but it is still a sign—that is, a worldly synthesis, which carries non-presence and difference within pure auto-affection. "Auto-affection as the operation of the voice," Derrida writes, "assumed that a pure difference came to divide self-presence" (VP 70). Here we discover the movement of "différance" that inhabits the living present. This movement opens up transcendental life onto what is supposed to be suspended by transcendental reduction and thus onto the relation to death and originary writing.¹³ It thus consists in the self's relation to itself as different or

other than itself.¹⁴ Later, we see that this understanding of auto-affection and auto-relation as *différance*, as the originary possibility of writing, or as the trace, refers the transcendental subject back to the most general definition of life as leaving a trace in the world, at the same time as it accounts for life's evolution. In other words, we find in *différance* the point of departure for telling the history of life.¹⁵

At this point, the deconstruction of phenomenological voice and thus of consciousness requires one last step. If the privileging of voice over the other media of signification seems to be linked to its purely temporal structure—the fact that it is given in the present—then the movement of *différance* must have already been at work within the “temporal fabric” of voice (71).¹⁶ To demonstrate this claim, Derrida recalls a passage from the lectures on the *Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* in which Husserl describes the movement of temporalization as pure auto-affection—namely, *genesis spontanea*.¹⁷ I cannot engage with Derrida's analyses of this immense philosophical problem here, and limit myself to highlighting his argument and its effects on the problem of the history of life. Derrida suggests that what Husserl calls *genesis spontanea* is the process by which the now constitutes itself by making itself into a retention or a retentional trace. He describes this process as follows: “the living now, producing itself by spontaneous generation, must, in order to be a now, be retained in another now, must affect itself, without empirical recourse, with a new originary actuality in which it will become a non-now as a past now” (VP 72-73). Ultimately, the movement of temporalization as pure auto-affection would have already been the movement of *différance* or of the originary possibility of writing—here designated as *archi-writing*:

The living present arises on the basis of its non-self-identity, and on the basis of the retentional trace. It is always already a trace. This trace is unthinkable if we start from the simplicity of a present whose life would be interior to itself. The self of the living

present is originally a trace. The trace is not an attribute about which we could say that the self of the living present “is originally” the trace. It is necessary to think originary-being from the trace and not the trace from originary-being. This archi-writing is at work in the origin of sense. (VP 73)

Not only can the living present not be dissociated from the trace; above all, the living present turns out to be reinscribed within the history of life as leaving a trace in the world. First, as Derrida points out, the movement of temporalization described above calls into question the privileging of phenomenological voice as a merely temporal structure.¹⁸ Secondly—and this is what matters to us more—the trace, qua the originary possibility of repetition that allows us to think auto-affection or auto-relation in general, accounts for the history in which the becoming conscious of life is possible. I refer to the text in which, although in passing, Derrida highlights the link between the history of life and the trace: “without concealing that the problem of their relations [between retention and re-presentation] is nothing other than *the history of ‘life’ and of life’s becoming-conscious*, we must be able to say *a priori* that their common root, the possibility of re-petition in its most general form, the trace” (VP 58; italics mine).

It is worth recalling that Derrida develops this link between the deconstruction of consciousness and the opening of the history of life in a footnote to *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* (1962). This note sheds light on the premises of the argument that we have taken as the point of departure for our reading.¹⁹ In the *Introduction*, Derrida explains that, for Husserl, the living present constitutes the ultimate form of ideality to the extent that it secures the indefinite reactivation of meaning as identical to itself in the individual consciousness. On the margins of this explanation, he adds a *deconstructive* note in which he argues that Husserl cannot question the transition from the passive retention of meaning to its active recollection, as this transition constitutes the very axiom of

phenomenology—the principle of the self-presence of transcendental life and of the auto-donation of consciousness. Derrida unfolds the consequences that follow from taking account of this transition and thus of the most general possibility of repetition (what he designates later as the trace) that is the common root of passive retention and active recollection and that allows for the transition between them. As he suggests, we would liberate the history of life as leaving a trace in the world and thus would retrace phenomenology back to a thinking that takes into account the becoming conscious of life. Derrida's note reads:

These processes are abundantly described in *The Phenomenology of Internal-Time Consciousness, Ideas I*, and in *FTL*. The passage from passive retention to memory or to the activity of recollection, a passage which “produces” ideality and pure Objectivity as such and makes other absolute origins appear as such, is always described by Husserl as an already given essential possibility, as a structural ability whose source is not made a problem. Perhaps this source is not questioned by phenomenology because it is confused with the possibility of phenomenology itself. In its “factuality,” this passage is also that of the lower forms of Nature and conscious life. It can also be the thematic site of what today is called an “overcoming.” Here phenomenology would be “overcome” or completed in an interpretative philosophy. (*Edwin Husserl's Origin of Geometry* 86)

The note then refers to the project of overcoming phenomenology through a dialectic of real movement as it is elaborated by the French-Vietnamese philosopher Tran Duc Thao in his *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* (1951). “Thus Trân-Dúc-Tháo,” Derrida writes, “after a remarkable interpretation of phenomenology, exposes the ‘Dialectic of Real Movement,’ starting from the concepts of retention and reproduction and from difficulties attached to them in phenomenology, which alone, however, can give them a rigorous sense” (*An Introduction* 86). Derrida's concept of the becoming-conscious-of-life can be read as a

rewriting of Thao's concept of the becoming-conscious-of-nature. Thao marks the transition from phenomenology to dialectic in the concluding pages of the first part of his work. He grounds the possibility of telling the history of life and of its evolution in the real movement of the constituting subjectivity that, according to him, results from transcendental reduction and yet is not just consciousness:

We end with *dialectical materialism* as the *truth of transcendental idealism*. Since the naive attitude has been definitively suppressed by the reduction, the *practice* of the description of pure lived experience is necessarily *absorbed* within a dialectical materialism that *suppresses* it in its properly phenomenological sense in order to preserve it in its resultant form and *to elevate it to a superior level*. We maintain the authentic demands of the *Weltkonstitution* by getting rid of its idealistic illusions. It is, indeed, a matter of "bracketing" the world of *constituted appearances*, which the *fetishism* of naive consciousness takes for realities in themselves, and of returning to true being through the *constituting subjectivity*. But the latter is not the *Heraclitean flux* of pure consciousness: it is the real movement by which nature *becomes conscious of itself* in biological evolution and human history. (129)²⁰

Now, the movement that has taken us from the phenomenological concept of consciousness to the thinking of life as leaving a trace in the world leaves a question open. If we admit with Derrida that the general structure of the trace is another name for life, we may ask how this structure has been—and is yet to be—articulated across the history of life and evolution. Derrida addresses this question in a passage from *Of Grammatology* (1967), where he suggests that we need to take up again the indiscernibility of the elements of idealization and consciousness from *différance* and the trace. From this perspective, we understand the articulations of life as related to the degree of mastery that the living has over its own possibility, or power, of repeating the ideal object. Derrida thus explains:

This possibility—another name for “life”—is a general structure articulated by the history of life, and leading to complex and hierarchical operations. Auto-affection, the as-for-itself or for-itself—subjectivity—gains in power and in its mastery of the other to the extent that its power of repetition *idealizes itself*. Here idealization is the movement by which sensory exteriority, that which affects me or serves me as signifier, submits itself to my power of repetition, to what thenceforward appears to me as my spontaneity and escapes me less and less. (*Of Grammatology* 165-166)

III.

In what follows, I focus on Derrida’s deconstruction of the Cartesian foundations of the modern narrative of life, as he develops it in the essays published in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006; hereafter *AIA*). My aim is to demonstrate that this deconstruction does not just hinge on the deconstruction of the phenomenological concept of consciousness that we have examined above. Instead, Derrida develops his conception of life as leaving a trace in the world by highlighting its implications for the modern distinction between animal and human auto-relation (namely, between auto-affection and autotelicity) and, consequently, for the concept of responsibility and its ethico-political elaborations.

In the concluding pages of the first essay included in the collection, Derrida focuses on two distinctions that characterize the modern narrative of life: the distinction between the organic and the inorganic and between the animal and the human. This narrative places the question of the difference between the animal and the human within the broader demarcation of the physico-chemical domain of the inorganic and the life of the living (namely, animality).²¹ Derrida reproduces this demarcation by having recourse to auto-affection (auto-relation, auto-mobility, autobiography, tracing, etc.) which specifies the living being or the animal in general and thus seems to be shared with the human (identified as the *ego cogito* or

the “I think”). At this point, another demarcation—more properly, an abyss—has been conjured up within the domain of life and animality, between the animal and the human, and between auto-affection and “I think” (in the lexicon of Descartes, *ego cogito*), which is constituted by the power of transforming its traces into speech and thus of elaborating discursive responses. This narrative reads as follows:

Animality, the life of the living, at least when one claims to be able to distinguish it from the inorganic, from the purely inert or cadaverous physico-chemical, is generally defined as sensibility, irritability, and *auto-motricity*, a spontaneity that is capable of movement, of organizing itself and affecting itself, marking, tracing, and affecting itself with traces of its self. This *auto-motricity* as auto-affection and relation to itself is the characteristic recognized as that of the living and of animality in general, even before one comes to consider the discursive thematic of an utterance or of an *ego cogito*, more so of a *cogito ergo sum*. But between this relation to the self (this Self, this ipseity) and the *I* of the “I think,” there is, it would seem, an abyss ... No one has ever denied the animal this capacity to track itself, to trace itself or retrace a path of itself. Indeed, the most difficult problem lies in the fact that it has been refused the power to transform those traces into verbal language, to call to itself by means of discursive questions and responses, denied the power to efface its traces. (*AIA* 49-50)²²

In Derrida’s reproduction of the modern narrative on animal and human auto-relation, the “I think” seems to share with the phenomenological concept of consciousness the feature of the self-presence of the living present in the element of speech. This narrative also seems to associate a certain ability to respond, or responsibility, to the human self that is present to itself and hears itself speak. As it is suggested in the aforementioned passage (see the reference to the *cogito*), Derrida finds in the Cartesian conception of the human self as “I

think” the very presupposition of this narrative.²³ Therefore, in the second essay of the collection, he traces this Cartesian legacy through the close reading of two passages from the second *Meditation* (1641) and the letter to Henricus Reneri for Alphonse Pollot (1638), respectively.

First, Derrida analyses Descartes’s elaboration of the axiom of the modern history of life, that is, the traits of that special kind of auto-relation that Descartes ascribes to the human by dissociating it from animal auto-relation (auto-affection). To this end, he follows the text of the second *Meditation* as it demarcates the human self, the “I am,” from everything that can be detached from it. The passage under scrutiny begins with the following question: “What then did I formerly think I was? A man. But what is a man?” (*Meditations* 17). Descartes responds to this question by starting from what immediately comes to his mind: first, “the whole mechanical structure [*toute cette machine*] of limbs”; secondly, the fact that “I was nourished, that I moved about, and that I engaged in sense-perception, and thinking.”²⁴ Interestingly, Descartes attributes these “actions” to a “soul” that he imagines “to be something tenuous, like a wind or fire or ether” (*Meditations* 17). According to Derrida, these traits associated with a physical soul identify what Descartes understands by life or animality. “Each time that ... he has to evoke these signs of life or animation—therefore of animality—constituted by auto-affection or auto-motion,” Derrida points out, “he relates them to a living soul that ... can only be a body” (*AIA* 72). As the reductions follow one another, Descartes comes to the point of determining the pure “I am” as a thinking thing. He writes: “Thinking? At last I have discovered it—thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist—that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking” (*Meditations* 18). One cannot help interweaving this final reduction of animality and thus this determination of the human self together with what Derrida designates in *Voice and Phenomenon* as the metaphysical project itself, that is, the understanding of the ultimate form of ideality as the presence of the living

present. Indeed, Derrida reads Descartes's passage as an affirmation of that project: "The presence to itself of the present of thinking, the presence that presents itself to itself in the present, that is what excludes everything detachable constituted by life, the living body, animal life" (*AIA* 72). Therefore, on Derrida's reading, Descartes places at the basis of his narrative of life the metaphysical conception of the "I am" (as a self-present thinking thing). This conception constitutes the kind of auto-relation that specifies the human self and opens up the abyss from animality.

Secondly, Derrida examines the passage from the aforementioned letter to Reneri (for Pollot), in which Descartes establishes the limit of animality in the light of the metaphysical determination of the pure "I am." In this passage, Descartes develops the point on responsibility that Derrida had evoked at the moment of recounting the modern narrative of life. Descartes invites the reader to distrust the judgement that animals have a soul as it amounts to an opinion rashly acquired in childhood. In support of his thesis, he sets up the following scene:

Suppose that a man had been brought up all his life in some place where he had never seen any animals except men; and suppose that he was very devoted to the study of mechanics, and had made, or helped to make, various automatons shaped like a man, a horse, a dog, a bird, and so on, which walked and ate, and breathed, and so far as possible imitated all the other actions of the animals they resembled, including the signs we use to express our passions, like crying when struck and running away when subjected to a loud noise. Suppose that sometimes he found it impossible to tell the difference between the real men and those which had only the shape of men, and had learnt by experience that there are only the two ways of telling: ... first, that such automatons never answer in word or sign, except by chance, to questions put to them; and secondly, correspond that though their movements are often more regular and

certain than those of the wisest men, yet in many things which they would have to do to imitate us, they fail more disastrously than the greatest fools. (*The Philosophical Writings* 99-100)

From this fiction, according to Descartes, we should be able to reconsider our judgment before real animals.²⁵ We should understand that “the resemblance between some exterior actions of animals and our own ... is not at all a sufficient basis to prove that there is any resemblance between the corresponding interior actions” (*The Philosophical Writings* 100). Derrida draws attention to the fact that Descartes’s argument hinges on the presupposition of a limit or a threshold for the animal, that is, the ability to not react to a programmable question, like an automaton, but “to [freely] respond to true questioning” (*AIA* 82-83).²⁶ The metaphysical determination of the human self as a self-present thinking thing secures this ability and thus marks the limit between animal and human auto-relation. As anticipated, Derrida formalizes this divide/abyss between animality and the human as the divide/abyss between two kinds of auto-relation, between auto-affection and “I think.” On the one hand, we have the way the living relates to itself by demarcating itself from the physico-chemical domain of the inorganic (auto-affection, automotion, etc.). On the other hand, we have the self-present thinking thing that Derrida designates as *auto-deictic* and auto-monstrative *auto-telicity* (*autotélie*). He has the following formulation of these new concepts of “auto-telicity” and “auto-deicticity”:

Every living creature, and thus every animal to the extent that it is living, has recognized in it this power to move spontaneously, to feel itself and to relate to itself. However problematic it be, that is even the characteristic of what lives, as traditionally conceived in opposition to the inorganic inertia of the purely physico-chemical ... But what is in dispute ... is the power to make reference to the self in deictic or autodeictic terms, the capability at least virtually to turn a finger toward

oneself in order to say “this is I” ... It is what says “I am speaking of me”; the one who says “I” shows himself in the present of his utterance, or at least of its manifestation. Because it is held to be incapable of this autodeictic or auto-referential self-distancing [*autotélie*] and deprived of the “I,” the animal will lack any “I think,” as well as understanding and reason, response and responsibility. (AIA 94)²⁷

Here Derrida makes explicit that human auto-relation, that is, the Cartesian presupposition of the modern narrative of life, consists in the metaphysical axiom of the coincidence of voice and consciousness that grants the self-presence and self-proximity of transcendental life. As we know, this axiom presupposes the dissimulation of the process of death and signification that has always been at work in voice and consciousness. For Derrida, it is precisely the deconstruction of this axiom that liberates the history of life and allows us to tell this history. Therefore, he sketches a “critical reelaboration” of the modern narrative of life that hinges on the deconstruction he had initiated many years earlier in *Voice and Phenomenon*. This reelaboration does not limit itself to pointing to examples of autodeictic autotelicity in animal life—such as in genetic systems as well as in social phenomena of narcissistic exhibition.²⁸ Above all, it is a matter of calling into question the metaphysical axiom in itself, “the axiom that permits one to accord purely and simply to the human or to the rational animal that which one holds the just plain animal to be deprived of” (AIA 95).²⁹ From this re-elaboration, it follows that the Cartesian distinction between human and animal auto-relation, between “I think” and auto-affection, and thus the very principle of the modern narrative of life, are reinscribed within the ultra-transcendental conception of life as leaving a trace in the world.

Derrida writes:

If autoposition, the *automonstrative autotely* of the “I,” even in the human, implies the “I” to be an other that must welcome within itself some irreducible hetero-affection (as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere), then this autonomy of the “I” can be

neither pure nor rigorous; it would not be able to form the basis for a simple and linear differentiation of the human from the animal. (*AIA* 95)³⁰

Derrida seems to conceive of autodeictic autotelicity (whether it is animal or human) as an effect of the trace qua the possibility of repetition in general, that is, as the self's relation to the trace of the other. In so doing, he evokes another narrative of life that accounts for the history and evolution of the living.³¹ Moreover, the deconstruction of the Cartesian axiom of human autotelicity propagates its effects on the concept of responsibility and its ethico-political developments. As we know, the ability to respond to a true questioning is structurally linked to human auto-relation ("I think") and autotelicity ("this is I") and thus relapses into the Cartesian legacy at work in the modern narrative of life. From the deconstruction of this legacy and, consequently, from the reinscription of the distinction between animal and human auto-relation within another narrative of life, it follows that responsibility too is deconstructed and that the distinction between reaction and response is reinscribed. Here we can only point to this theoretical programme, which Derrida formulates in session six of the seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign I* (2001-2002, published after his death in 2008):

And so the point would be to reinscribe this *différance* of reaction and response and thereby this historicity of ethical, juridical, or political responsibility into another thinking of life, living beings, into another relation of the living to their ipseity, and thereby to their supposed sovereignty, their *autos*, their own autokinesis and reactional automaticity, to death, technique, or to the machinic. (120)

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¹ In the collection of essays entitled *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, which was published after Derrida's death, and which I take up in section III, Derrida writes: "Let me note very quickly in passing, concerning intellectual autobiography, that ... [the] very first substitution of the concept of trace or mark for those of speech, sign, or signifier was destined in advance, and quite deliberately, to cross the frontiers of anthropocentrism, the limits of a language confined to human words and discourse. Mark, gramma, trace, and *différance* refer differentially to all living things, all the relations between living and nonliving" (102). This concluding sentence can be read as an echo of the epigraph extracted from *Grammatology*.

² On the consideration that Derrida has for this text within the trajectory of his work, see *Positions*: "In a classical philosophical architecture, *Voice and Phenomenon* would come first: in it is posed, at a point which appears juridically decisive for reasons that I cannot explain here, the question of the privilege of the voice and of phonetic writing in their relationship to the entire history of the West, such as this history can be represented by the history of metaphysics, and metaphysics in its most modern, critical, and vigilant form: Husserl's transcendental phenomenology" (5). For close readings of *VP*, see Marrati-Guénoun, *Genesis and Trace*, Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl*, and Kates, *Essential History*, to which I refer as my writing unfolds. To my

knowledge, there are no readings of *VP* that develop the link between the deconstruction of consciousness and the opening of the history of life.

³ See *VP*: “What would be at issue will be to begin to verify that the resource of the phenomenological critique is the metaphysical project itself, in its historical completion and in the purity of its origin albeit restored” (5). On this point, see Lawlor 168-169.

⁴ Derrida writes: “One would be able to bring to light the single and permanent motive for all the mistakes and all the perversions that Husserl denounces in ‘degenerate’ metaphysics, across a multiplicity of domains, themes, and arguments: it is always a blindness in the face of the authentic mode of *ideality*, of that which *is*, which can be *repeated* indefinitely in the *identity* of its *presence* because of the very fact that it does not exist, is not *reell*, is *irreell*” (*VP* 5).

⁵ See *VP*: “The value of presence ... modifies itself, without its being lost, every time what is at issue is the presence of any object whatsoever to consciousness in the clear evidence of a fulfilled intuition or when what is at issue is self-presence in consciousness—‘consciousness’ meaning nothing other than the possibility of the self-presence of the present in the living present” (8).

⁶ For Derrida’s reformulation of this distinction, see *VP* 15. See also *VP* 16, where he explains his translation of *Bedeutung* by *meaning* or *wanting-to-say* (*vouloir-dire*). On *Bedeutung*, see Kates 134.

⁷ Derrida interprets this phenomenological situation as the intentional relation to the object that Husserl formalizes later as the noetic-noematic sphere of intentional consciousness. On this point, see *VP*: “transcendental phenomenological idealism responds to the necessity to describe the *objectivity* of the *object* (*Gegenstand*) and the *presence* of the present (*Gegen-wart*)—and the objectivity in presence—on the basis of an ‘interiority,’ or rather on the basis of a self-proximity, an *ownness* (*Eigenheit*), which is not a simple *inside*, but the intimate possibility of the relation to an over-there and to an outside in general. That is why the essence of intentional consciousness will be revealed (for example, in *Ideas* I, § 49) only in the reduction of the totality of the existing world in general” (19); and *VP*: “Later, after the discovery of the transcendental reduction, he will describe the solitary life of the soul as the noetic-noematic sphere of consciousness” (27). On pure expressivity as the very possibility of phenomenology, see Marrati 64-65 and 68-69.

⁸ Cf. *VP*: “In expression the intention is absolutely on purpose because it animates a voice which can remain wholly internal and because the expressed is a *Bedeutung*, that is, an ideality that does not ‘exist’ in the world” (28).

⁹ Making explicit why the phenomenological concept of sign constitutes a privileged example for his reading of phenomenology, Derrida writes: “The determination and erasure of the sign in metaphysics is the dissimulation of this relation to death, which nevertheless was producing signification” (*VP* 53). For a definition of writing as the writer’s relation to death, see *VP*: “writing—the common name for signs that function despite the total absence of the subject, by means of (and beyond) his death” (79-80).

¹⁰ On the phenomenality of the phenomenological voice, see *VP* 66. Derrida also describes this phenomenality as the signifier’s self-effacement (or self-reduction) that is simultaneous with its production: “The phenomenological ‘body’ of the signifier seems to erase itself in the very moment it is produced. From this point on, it seems already to belong to the element of ideality. It reduces itself phenomenologically and transforms the mundane opacity of its body into pure diaphaneity. This erasure of the sensible body and of its exteriority is *for consciousness* the very form of the immediate presence of the signified” (*VP* 66). On the complicity between idealization and voice, see Marrati 74-75 and Lawlor 190-194.

¹¹ Here Derrida refers to Hegel’s semiology as the most accomplished analysis of the complicity between idealization and voice. He offers a close reading of this analysis in the essay “The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology” (first published in 1971 and then included in *Margins of Philosophy*, 1972).

¹² From the opening pages of *VP*, Derrida draws attention to what seems to be implied from the phenomenological account of ideality: the relation of “an existing in general”—not merely consciousness—to its own death. “Is this to say,” he asks, “that what opens the repetition to the infinite or what is opened in repetition when the movement of idealization is secured, *is* a certain relation of an ‘existent’ to his death? Is this to say that ‘transcendental life’ is the scene of this relation?” (8).

¹³ See *VP*: “The possibility of everything that we believe we are able to exclude from auto-affection is enrooted in this pure difference: space, the outside, the world, the body, etc. As soon as we admit that auto-affection is the condition of self-presence, no pure transcendental reduction is possible” (70-71).

¹⁴ Derrida continues: “This movement of *différance* does not supervene upon a transcendental subject. The movement of *différance* produces the transcendental subject. Auto-affection is not a modality of experience that characterizes a being that would already be itself (autos). Auto-affection produces the same as the self-relation in the difference with itself, the same as the non-identical” (*VP* 71). On this passage, see the excellent remarks in Kates 153-157.

¹⁵ I suggest that this understanding of auto-relation (as *différance*) accounts for “the concept of ultra-transcendental life” (*VP* 13) that Derrida formulates in the introductory chapter of *VP*, a life that is the common

root of transcendental and empirical life. Lawlor (174-175) and Kates (138-140) draw attention to this link but do not develop its implications for the question of the history of life.

¹⁶ Cf. Marrati 75-77.

¹⁷ For Husserl's text, see *VP*: "The originary impression is the absolute beginning of this production, the originary source, that starting from which all the rest is continuously produced. But it itself is not produced. It is not born as something produced, but by *genesis spontanea*, it is originary generation" (71-72).

¹⁸ Derrida writes: "We see that the theme of a pure interiority of speech or of 'hearing-oneself-speak' is radically contradicted by 'time' itself" (*VP* 74).

¹⁹ On the first part of this note, see Vitale, "The Text and the Living," which suggests finding here Derrida's decisive step beyond phenomenology towards archi-writing. In what follows, I reread the whole note in light of my interpretation of *Voice and Phenomenon* and I highlight the intersection between Derrida's argument contra phenomenology and the dialectical materialism of Tran Duc Thao.

²⁰ On Derrida's relation to Thao across his early work on Husserl, see Giovannangeli, "Husserl entre Derrida and Tran Duc Thao."

²¹ For Derrida's protocols on the difference of the human and the use of the term "animal," see Derrida, *AIA* 47 and 53-54, respectively.

²² As a premise of an alternative narrative of life, let me recall those pages from "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)" (1998), where Derrida marks a noteworthy difference between dating mineral and plant sediments to the timeless time in which no living being signaled its presence on earth and taking account of the singular event of two midges immobilized in amber while making love. This event, he argues, still happens today as its trace is consigned to us. See also *Without Alibi* 130-131.

²³ On the founding role of the Cartesian thought of animality, see Derrida, *AIA* 54. For an excellent development of Derrida's reading of Descartes, see Wills, *Inanimation*. The analysis that I develop here differs from Wills's in that it aims to cast light on the link that interweaves the deconstruction of the modern thought of animality and the deconstruction of phenomenological consciousness. In other words, I reread the deconstruction of the modern thought of animality in the wake of Derrida's concept of ultra-transcendental life.

²⁴ Descartes writes: "the whole mechanical structure [*toute cette machine*] of limbs which can be seen in a corpse, and which I called the body" (*Meditations* 17). Here we can find the metaphysical determination of animality as non-living or mechanical that we find evoked by Derrida in the epigraph of our text.

²⁵ On this scene, Derrida remarks: "The scene and logic of the argument seem to me more strange than has been most often noted. Here we have a character, a man, and this man is a man who, having learned, fictitiously, to manufacture impeccable automatons, would conclude *in reality*, by means of a judgment, that the animals are *in truth*, for their part, automatons, automatons of flesh and blood. And why is this so? Because they *resemble* automatons that *resemble* humans. And this conclusion, let us never forget, follows from a judgment" (83).

²⁶ Derrida describes responsibility as the ability to give a non-programmed response to a non-programmed questioning: "The question of the response is thus that of the question, of the response as response to a question that, at one and the same time, would remain unprogrammable and leave to the other alone the freedom to respond, presuming that were possible (a technohistorical field with a bright future, even though the programming of question and response seems to foreclose the future). The Cartesian animal, like its descendants (once again I'll try to recognize there Kant, Heidegger, Lacan, and Levinas, which also means so many others), would remain incapable of responding to true questioning" (*AIA* 84).

²⁷ Derrida has recourse to the concept of autotelicity for the first time in "To Speculate – On 'Freud'" (included in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*). In this text, he highlights the deconstruction of autotelicity, understood as the movement of teleological auto-institution, by focusing on the process of the *tele-* (*différance*, the originary possibility of writing/posting, tele-communication, etc.) that is at work in that movement. For this reason, Derrida's "autotelicity" has already meant "self-distancing," as the English translator seems to suggest with his choice. As for the concept of the autodeictic, I suggest that here Derrida refers to the kind of monstration that takes place in the phenomenological situation of pure expression in the solitary life of the soul—that is, voice. On this kind of monstration (*Hinzeigen*), which is not an indication, I refer to the beautiful remarks that Derrida makes in *VP* 64. For an adventurous reading of autotelicity in the wake of a preoriginary rhetoricity, see Davis, "Autozoography."

²⁸ For these examples, see *AIA* 95.

²⁹ On Derrida's concern for the philosophical argument rather than the scientific falsification of the modern thought of animality, see the important observations in Naas 16-17. Pushing these observations further, I argue that here Derrida is interested in reinscribing the thought of animality back to the thinking of life as leaving a trace in the world that he has been elaborating throughout his work and that, on his view, allows us to tell the history of life.

³⁰ Here it is worth recalling the increasing attention to Husserl's work on animality in current philosophical debates. In particular, I refer to Di Martino, "Husserl and the Question of Animality," as representative of this

line of research. Drawing on Di Martino's close reading of the analyses developed in volume 15 of the *Husserliana*, it seems that Husserl subscribes to the Cartesian legacy as it is displayed by Derrida in *AIA*. As Di Martino points out, Husserl identifies the correlative of "the historical-cultural world" specifically inhabited by the human with "the personal self," that is, "the self-conscious and free self, necessarily implicated in the unfolding of the historical-cultural world" (61). Furthermore, this personal self is placed within a community that is jointly empathic and linguistic (Di Martino 65-66). In other words, the Husserlian conception of the human being seems to presuppose the autodeictic autotelicity evoked by Derrida in his reading of Descartes. From this perspective, it undergoes Derrida's critical elaboration of the modern narrative of life.

³¹ On the deconstructive conception of autodeicticity, permit me to refer to my forthcoming reading of Derrida's engagement with the autobiographical question in Nietzsche and Heidegger.