This entry focuses on the relationship between the concepts of “deconstruction” and “phenomenology” as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida develops and interweaves them together in the writings that he had published from 1967 on. It consists of the following steps: a) it starts with Derrida’s elaboration of the concept and work of deconstruction; b) it explains why, for Derrida, the deconstruction of phenomenology comes first; c) it highlights links and shifts between the deconstruction of phenomenology and the works that Derrida had devoted to Husserl before 1967; d) it focuses on the concept of ultra-transcendental life as the key legacy of the deconstruction of phenomenology for Derrida’s later work.  

In *Positions* (1972), Derrida designates his work by the term “deconstruction,” placing it at the limits of philosophical discourse. Within these limits, he explains, philosophy has established itself as a system of conceptual oppositions or philosophemes without which it would be neither possible nor practicable. Deconstruction constitutes the attempt to carry these philosophemes to their closure—that is, to trace their history from a certain outside that this very history cannot qualify and thus to determine the latter as the history of a repression (Derrida 1982, 6). This textual work at the limits of philosophical discourse allows us, according to Derrida, to read philosophemes as the symptoms of an experience that has never been present, an illusionary experience around whose necessity an epoch such as that of metaphysics has been structured (Derrida 1982, 7). This illusionary experience is the reduction of the exteriority of the signifier. For this reason, a certain determination of the sign or a semiology, whose fundamental presuppositions can be found from Plato to Husserl, is at the heart of metaphysics (Derrida 1982, 22). However, if the aforementioned symptoms are revealed at that time, this is not, for Derrida, because of someone’s initiative, but the effect of a total transformation extending across regional fields, from theoretical mathematics to molecular biology, from cybernetics to telecommunication (Derrida 1982, 7). In *Grammatology*, Derrida explains that we can observe a process of overflowing at work in Western culture by which the concept of writing, until then determined as the signifier of the signifier, comes to exceed and encompass the very extension of language. Hence there is no transcendental signified that would not be already involved in the play of signifying renvois that constitutes writing as the movement of language (Derrida 1976, 7). Writing as the possibility of the inscription in general, namely, arche-writing, accounts for the minimal synthesis of experience, from the most elementary process of information in the cell (revealed by the biology of the time, namely, genetics) to the most complex practice of information (cybernetics) (Derrida
1976, 9). The historical closure of the epoch of metaphysics is thus outlined. The concept of sign is exemplary here precisely as it betrays the work of agony of a tradition that wishes to strip meaning away from the process of signification. The concept, work and style of deconstruction is concerned with what in that concept has been systematically and genealogically determined by the history of metaphysics (Derrida 1976, 14).

From these premises, Derrida argues in Positions that the general strategy of deconstruction cannot consist in neutralizing the oppositions of metaphysics and remaining within them, merely. It requires a double gesture. On the one hand, deconstruction must revert the violent hierarchy that underlies all metaphysical oppositions. However, the reversion still takes place within the deconstructed system. Therefore, on the other hand, through a double writing, deconstruction must demarcate itself from the mere inversion of metaphysical oppositions and cause the irruption of a new concept that does no longer let itself be encompassed within the deconstructed system (Derrida 1982, 41). First and foremost, one may think of the work done by a new concept of writing, which achieves the inversion of the metaphysical hierarchy speech/writing at the same time as it makes writing irrupt from within speech, thus carrying out the aforementioned overflowing of writing (Derrida 1982, 42). This new concept is an undecidable to the extent that it does not constitute itself as a third term, as a solution in the form of speculative dialectics (Derrida 1982, 43).

At this point, it is worth understanding how Derrida interprets phenomenology within the epoch of metaphysics and why the point of departure for deconstruction consists in the deconstruction of phenomenology. He suggests that, if we want to describe his work in terms of a classical philosophical architecture, we should allow that his deconstructive reading of the phenomenological concept of sign, entitled Speech and Phenomena (SP) and published in the same year as Of Grammatology and Writing and Difference, comes first. As Derrida puts it, this reading raises the question of phonocentrism, of the privilege of voice and phonetic writing in relation to Western history as the history of metaphysics and to the most modern, critical and vigilant version of this history, that is, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology (Derrida 1982, 5).

In the following pages, we unpack this suggestion by looking at SP and by casting light on the relation of this deconstructive work to Derrida's earlier or pre-deconstructive readings of Husserl. As suggested by Derrida himself in Positions, the working hypothesis of SP is that the phenomenological concept of sign as it is elaborated by Husserl in the first chapter of the first Logical Investigation constitutes a privileged case for showing that the phenomenological critique of metaphysics constitutes the historical achievement of metaphysics itself in its original project (Derrida 1973, 5). To put this hypothesis to the test, Derrida recalls that the unique and persisting motif of Husserl's critique of metaphysics points to the inability of metaphysical perversions to grasp the authentic mode of ideality—that is, of the possibility of the indefinite repetition of the presence of the ideal object as identical to itself. This possibility, Husserl explains, requires the nonreality or independence of ideality from worldly and empirical existence. Therefore, the ultimate form of ideality, which secures an indefinite and identical repetition, is the presence of the living present or the self-presence of transcendental life (Derrida 1973, 6). Later, we see that the enigma of life inscribed in these expressions is one of the main concerns of Derrida's deconstructive reading. A crucial difficulty arises when Husserl has to reconcile the facts that the ideal objects are historical products made possible through the mediation of language and that consciousness, as the element of transcendental life, consists in the possibility of producing them. Does it follow from this, Derrida remarks, that the element of consciousness is indiscernible from that of language and thus that ideality has already admitted a worldly and empirical synthesis? This difficulty does not account for a weakness implicit in Husserl's system, but concerns metaphysics as such (Derrida 1973, 15). From this perspective, Husserl's proposal repre-
resents a refined version of the metaphysical solution of this difficulty. It amounts to the concept of phenomenological voice, which is no longer a physical and worldly voice, but is taken in its transcendental flesh that thus protects the self-presence of transcendental life (Derrida 1973, 16). Husserl draws this concept on the distinction between expression and indication, namely, a sign that does not express anything as it does not convey *Bedeutung* (which Derrida translates by “wanting-to-say” since it designates an animating intention) (Derrida 1973, 17-18). Voice accounts for the phenomenological situation of purity in which expression is disentangled from indication. This situation cannot be that of empirical and worldly communication, for reasons that will appear evident later, but is that of the absolutely low voice of the solitary life of the soul. It consists in the exteriorization, still within consciousness, of the relation of the intention of *Bedeutung* to the ideal object, which, according to Derrida, prefigures what Husserl calls later the noetico-noematic sphere (Derrida 1973, 22). In expression the intention is fully expressed as it animates a voice that does not seem to imply an empirical and worldly synthesis (Derrida 1973, 33). Derrida follows the progressive reductions of indication as Husserl operates them in order to determine the phenomenological voice. In doing so, he shows that indication designates the general situation in which the intention that animates a discourse and is present to itself in consciousness (psyché or spirit) goes out of itself, in the world, or spaces out (as nature). To this extent, it accounts for the process by which the transcendental life of the spirit goes out of itself, in nature, that is, for the process of death at work in signification (Derrida 1973, 40). This work of death is what designates a particular kind of sign, writing, which by definition functions beyond and thanks to the death of its animating intention (Derrida 1973, 93). Therefore, the distinction between indication and expression aims to disentangle expression from the relation to death that constitutes the possibility of signification and, more precisely, of writing.

Derrida examines how the complicity between idealization and voice has taken place in the so-called epoch of metaphysics in a key section of SP entitled “The Voice That Keeps Silence” (§6) (Derrida 1973, 75). His argument is that voice is the kind of monstration that does not require a worldly and empirical synthesis. To this extent, it is the medium that makes idealization possible, as it protects the presence of the intended object and the self-presence (or self-proximity) of the intending acts. The phenomenality of phenomenological voice is such that I hear my voice in the present moment and thus in the self-proximity of enunciation. In other words, I hear myself speak (Derrida 1973, 75-76). From this it follows that the intention animating the signifier and transforming it into an expression does not go out of itself nor does it require the relation to death, which is implicit in signification and writing. The phenomenality of voice seems to operate a self-reduction or self-effacement by which it turns its phenomenological body into a pure transparency and thus has always already belonged to the medium of idealization. This phenomenality constitutes the very form of the presence of the object to consciousness (Derrida 1973, 77). Derrida designates this operation of the I’s hearing itself speak as a special kind of auto-affection, a pure one, that demarcates itself, for example, from the operation of self-touching. This auto-affection does not imply the exposure of the body proper to the world, with all the consequences that are implicit in it, such as the birth of nature, the relation to death, writing (Derrida 1973, 78). Rather, it consists in the self-presence and self-proximity of the I, and thus in the absolute reduction or effacement of space, etc. As Derrida explains, this auto-affection secures the possibility of what we call subjectivity or for-itself. Furthermore, voice is consciousness itself, as it unfolds the very meaning of consciousness as the element of universality, of the self-presence of transcendental life, in which I hear the other speak as if it were me (Derrida 1973, 79-80).

At this point, Derrida wonders how we can reconcile this reduction of language at work in phenomenological voice with Husserl’s insight that the inscription in the world is indis-
Phenomenology and deconstruction

Pensable for the constitution of ideal objects. He addresses this question by further developing the reading of this insight that he had elaborated earlier in his Introduction to Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*, where Husserl explicitly suggests that writing consists in the ultimate reduction required to secure the absolute objectivity of the geometric object (Derrida 1989, 76–86). According to Derrida, writing achieves the constitution of ideal objects only to the extent that it inscribes a given word. Therefore, reactivating writing becomes equivalent to reactivating the word implicit in it and thus reactivation is safe from any crisis implicit in the inscription (for instance, the aforementioned relation to death) (Derrida 1973, 80–81, see also Derrida 1989, 86–107). However, despite this understanding of writing, we cannot ignore the motif that leads Husserl to have recourse to writing as the ultimate constitution of ideal objects and thus of language itself (Derrida 1973, 81–82). Finally, the complicity of idealization and voice, as it is described by Derrida, is based on an illusionary experience, that of reducing the exteriority of the signifier, which, however, we find still at work in voice. Here we come closest to pure difference, understood as the root of everything that takes self-presence out of itself (nature, space, world, etc.), that is, the difference that divides self-presence. By appealing to the operation of auto-affection that is the voice as the condition of self-presence, Husserl admits a difference within self-presence. This difference makes transcendental reduction possible at the same time as impossible to the extent that it carries with itself what is supposed to be reduced. Derrida designates pure difference as the movement of différance that constitutes sameness (self/autos) as self-relation in the difference from itself (Derrida 1973, 82).

In the concluding pages of this section of SP, Derrida demonstrates that temporalization itself consists in the movement of différance as it has been described above. To this end, he suggests that this concept applies to the process of the originary generation (*genesis spontanea*) of time that Husserl analyses in his lectures on the *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (Derrida 1973, 83). Derrida summarizes this generation as the process by which a now produces itself spontaneously by retaining itself in another now, that is, by affecting itself with a new now in which it is retained as past. Hence, he concludes that the living present presupposes the possibility of retentional trace—namely, of the most general possibility of signification—and thus the former must be thought from the latter and not the other way around (Derrida 1973, 85). Temporalization is already spacing out (*espacement*), if we understand by that the fact that the living present produces itself by going out of itself. Finally, if we go back to the concept of phenomenological voice, we understand that temporalization contradicts the privilege of voice and of the operation of pure auto-affection to which the I’s hearing itself speak amounts. For Derrida, this privilege is grounded on the fact that the phenomenality of voice is merely temporal, that I hear myself speak in the very present of enunciation. But, as we know now, this temporal being has already involved the movement of différance (Derrida 1973, 86).

It is worth remarking that Derrida has recourse to the term “dialectic” to designate the movement that opens transcendental life onto différance and arche-writing and thus leads us as close as possible to pure difference and its consequences (spacing out, world, nature, signification, etc.). “Dialectic,” Derrida writes, “in every sense of the term and before any speculative subsumption of this concept.” (Derrida 1973, 69). This use of “dialectic” echoes the dissertation that Derrida had devoted earlier on to the problem of genesis in the philosophy of Husserl (first written in 1954 and then published in 1990). Here, Derrida resorts to the concept of dialectic to designate the originary complication of the transcendental and the worldly which, according to him, if one excepts the case of the aforementioned lectures on the phenomenology of internal time-consciousness, Husserl fails to take account of as his work develops and seems to come closer to it (Derrida 2003, XXV). As Derrida suggests in the preface to the later publication of the text, “dialectic” had disappeared from his work to leave room for différance and the
trace (Derrida 2003, XV). Therefore, by means of the aforementioned reference in SP, Derrida makes explicit the link between his earlier dialectical reading of Husserl and the later deconstructive one. In SP, he conceives of the movement of différence as the relation to death and thus the originary possibility of writing, or arche-writing—which is at work in the self-presence of transcendental life.

As we must think the self-presence of transcendental life from the movement of différence and arche-writing, it appears evident now why the enigma of the concept of life is at the heart of SP (Derrida 1973, 6). Derrida points to an ultra-transcendental life that consists in self-relation or self-affection (as self-difference) and thus constitutes the common root of empirical and transcendental life, or, in other words, accounts for all forms of life up to consciousness (Derrida 1973, 15). This concept of life does not lead us back to the pre-transcendental naïveté of ordinary language and biology but opens up the history of life and of its evolution (that is, of the becoming-conscious of life) (Derrida 1973, 67). Here Derrida intersects the proposal advanced by the French-Vietnamese philosopher Tran Duc Thao in the second part of his *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* (1951). Tran Duc Thao had elaborated the possibility of overcoming phenomenology onto a new dialectic of nature in which consciousness is the result of the real movement of the constituting subjectivity (Derrida 1989, 86). For Derrida, life as the trace allows us to deconstruct the metaphysical opposition between the non-living, that is, the animal and the machine, or the Cartesian animal-machine, and the living, and to tell the history of life and of its evolution as a process in which the power of repeating the ideal objects escapes less and less to the living (on these points see respectively Derrida 1976, 47 and 165-166). This deconstructive reading of the phenomenological concept of life is full of consequences for future developments of deconstruction. For instance, Derrida appeals to this reading in his later analyses of the modern thought of animality, from Descartes to Lacan, as well as of the ethico-political distinction between reaction and responsibility, in order to show that both are grounded on a metaphysical concept of life and thus to refer them back to the ultra-transcendental concept of life as the trace (Derrida 2008, 111, 2009, 120).

**Notes**

1 For a detailed reconstruction of the debate in Derrida/Husserl studies, see Kates 2005, 32-52. Kates also offers an overall interpretation of Derrida’s transition from his earlier work on Husserl to the later development of deconstruction. For other studies devoted to Derrida’s early work on Husserl, which also trace across that work the elements of future elaborations, see: Costa 1996; Giovannangeli 2001; Lawlor 2002; Marrati-Guénoun 2005.

2 To my knowledge, there is no reading of *Speech and Phenomena* that focuses on this enigma of life and links Derrida’s formulation of ultra-transcendental life to the problem of the history of life. For a further elaboration of this reading, see Senatore 2018.

3 Derrida’s reading of Tran Duc Thao’s interpretation of phenomenology shifts from *The Problem of Genesis to An Introduction*. For an overall analysis of Derrida’s relation to Thao across his early work, see (Giovannangeli 2001, Moati 2013, and Senatore 2018).

**References**


