Embodiment and the Limits of the Signifier: Derrida, Husserl and Meaning-as-Significance

Recent work in both Continental and Anglo-American traditions has questioned broadly language-oriented presuppositions dominant for much of the twentieth century, turning to “enactivist,” embodied or non-conceptualist positions according to which our relationship to the world is not governed exclusively by conceptual or propositional knowledge but also includes a variety of non-representational phenomena such as “sensorimotor knowledge,” “non-conceptual content,” “embodied copings,” and, perhaps most prevalently, affects. A common thread among these approaches is the appeal to a conception of experiential content that is broadly speaking phenomenological and not semantic, a conception that arises from a renewed attention to the phenomenology of everyday experience. On such views knowledge and experience are not seen exclusively in terms of linguistically or conceptually mediated responses to stimuli set over and against us but as basic activities in a world that we do not simply represent but live through as embodied beings.

Feminist affect theorists in particular, largely in critical response to deconstructive approaches, have argued that affects should be conceived as phenomena independent of and prior to linguistic or conceptual cognitive capacities such as intentions, meanings, or reasons, as, in Ruth Leys words, “nonsignifying, autonomic processes that take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning.” The basic thought is that affect, as a lived and bodily phenomenon “below the threshold” of conscious thought, it is to be understood on its own terms, and not simply as an aspect of signification or representation. While there are a variety of reasons for such an insistence, foremost among them is the suspicion that exclusively semantic accounts exclude important embodied aspects of experience, aspects that may be especially important for diagnosing certain forms of oppression and for developing strategies of resistance not constrained by the current state of a given discourse. As Marianne Janack has recently put it, echoing Linda Alcoff, “the appeal to discourse [alone] leaves no place for the prediscursive or the inarticulable. This poses a problem for our attempts to entertain the very concept of an experience that does not match up with the dominant discourses of the domain.”

But this turn away from deconstruction has lead to a different dilemma for affect theorists: if we wish to reject the mantra that there is “nothing outside the text” and focus on something outside and other-than signifying or conceptual registers, we are thereby—on most accounts—outside the space of meaning and value, and ultimately left with no resources other than the autonomic, processual, third-person standpoint more characteristic of the sciences or the more naturalistically inclined strains of contemporary analytic philosophy. Simply put, the worry is this: it seems to follow from the above-noted insistence on the non-signifying character of affect that if we wish to hold on to a theory of affect, we will have to do away with any talk of affect in relation to meaning. This rejection of meaning is problematic if affect theory is supposed to contribute to the theorization of forms of oppression that escape recognition in dominant discourses, since those discourses include not only patterns of language and signs but also the third-personal, objective analyses of the natural sciences. If affect theory does away with talk of meaning, it is hard to see how it can continue to theorize oppression as something lived and experienced.

This dilemma might be overcome if it is possible to hold on to the centrality of meaning as
a first-person phenomenon without seeing meaning as exclusively the domain of language, concepts, propositions, or significations. Something approaching such a conception has recently been proposed by Al Martinich under the moniker “meaning-as-significance. For Martinich, “meaning-as-significance” shares with the Gricean conception of natural meaning—and not with Grice’s “non-natural” or communicative meaning—the fact that it supports entailment, in the sense in which smoke “means” [entails] that there is fire (in this way meaning-as-significance is also distinct from Grice’s “intentional meaning”). At the same time, it shares with communicative meaning the fact that—unlike natural meaning—it is “personal,” i.e., it requires a subject to imbue the event, thing, experience, etc. with meaning (Martinich 2013). However, despite admitting that this conception of meaning does not fall into the traditional Gricean linguistic categories, Martinich’s account is limited to a fairly conventional linguistic analysis. If meaning-as-significance really represents a different dimension or category of meaning, it may make more sense to approach it though the lens of phenomenology.

Thus, in sympathy with the recent interest in the “non-signifying” character of affective and embodied experience, in what follows I argue that there is an inherent limitation to the deconstructive conception of meaning in relation to signification as presented in one of deconstruction’s philosophically foundational texts, Derrida’s Speech and Phenomena, since it cannot account for the significance of embodied or affective experiences. I argue instead for a return to the earlier phenomenological conception of meaning that Derrida criticizes—that of Husserl—according to which meaning is constituted in part through non-representational embodied structures that are intersubjective preconditions for significance. While Husserl’s conception was by no means developed with an eye to feminist theory, I think it better accords with contemporary work on embodiment and affect.

Through an analysis of Husserl’s conception of kinaesthesia, I sketch the beginnings of an alternative account according to which meaning can be understood—in a way that aligns with contemporary work on embodiment and affect—as rooted in non-representational embodied structures of meaningfulness or lived significance. Such structures help us to explain how ideality and intersubjectivity can be preserved without the reduction of the significance of embodied experience to structures of signification.

**Temporality, Spatality, and the Voice**

Derrida’s last extended treatment of Husserl, Speech and Phenomena, takes up the concern with the problems raised by Husserl’s account of the ideality of meaning as a temporal and historical process, a theme already raised in his first major work on Husserl, the Problem of Genesis (1954), and in the 1962 introduction to his translation of Husserl’s “Origin of Geometry” essay. The 1967 work puts the same basic objection to phenomenology as these earlier works: Derrida opposes to Husserl's largely abstract and formal-logical eidetic concerns with meaning a preference for the interpretation of meaning that is—as he puts it in the 1954 work—“concrete.” He insists that what Husserl sees as a pure and originary constituting now-moment of the presentation ideal meanings or Sinne is in fact always also a constituted moment. Each of Derrida’s major readings of Husserl (1954, 1962, 1967) seeks to limit Husserl’s claims regarding meaning by arguing that the phenomenological account of its origin is—to cite again from the earliest Husserl work—only one side of an ongoing and irresolvable “dialectic of phenomenology and ontology.”

In the same vein, the 1967 treatment of Husserl in Speech and Phenomena seeks to show that Husserl’s conception of expression as the immediate presentation of meaning in its closest
proximity to the originary and pre-expressive layer of sense is always already “contaminated” by the structure of indication. Just as writing was said to be always already implicated in the constitution of ideal objects in the 1962 *Introduction*, so is the structure of indication, with the characteristic “non-presence” of the sense it signifies, always already implicated in the supposedly pure and self-present moment of expression. There is no ‘now-moment’ of pure presence, but always already a ‘spacing’ that at once precludes the perfect reiteration of meaning as pure presence and also makes reiteration—as a ‘deferral’ of meanings always partially absent—possible at all (Derrida 1967a: 97-98/ 2011: 74-75).

Derrida thus extends the logic of signification and differance to the field of intuition itself, making the well-known appeal to the peculiar status of the voice (in the sense of the ‘inner voice’ one ‘hears’ in thinking to oneself) as that which makes phenomenology’s claim to self-conscious intuition of universalities on the basis of concrete ‘worldly’ or ‘intramundane’ experience of phenomena possible:

> [T]he unity of the sound and the voice, which allows the voice to produce itself in the world as pure auto-affection, is *the unique instance* that escapes from the distinction between intramundanity and transcendentality; and by the same token, it makes this distinction possible. It is this universality that results in the fact that, structurally and in principle, no consciousness is possible without the voice. The voice is being close to itself in the form of universality, as con-sciousness; the voice *is* consciousness. (Derrida 1967a: 89/ 2011: 68,

The unique status of the voice as ‘auto-affection’ calls into question the simple originarity of ideal meanings in an ‘interior’ consciousness by showing that an ‘outside’ world of signifiers in differential relations first makes the auto-affection of consciousness possible. In order to arrive at the concrete and the constituted, at the co-originarity of ‘worldly’ and ideal phenomena, Derrida analyses the supposed ideality of the meaning object to establish ‘originary difference’ at the origin of meaning constitution in *intuition itself*, in terms of both temporality and spatiality.iii

Since signification and ‘writing’ are public phenomena and always already ‘outside,’ not simply the provenance of the interiority of the speaker’s consciousness, their original co-implication in temporality by means of the voice guarantees the intertwining of the outside in the very interiority of consciousness. *Différance* as characteristic of this concrete “outside” is ascribed to Husserl’s supposedly ‘interior’ conception of ideal sense by writing it into the conditions of the possibility of intuition itself, allowing Derrida to describe the ‘primary intention’ of *Voice and Phenomenon* as ‘asserting that perception does not exist or that what we call perception is not originary, and that in a certain way everything “begins” by means of “representation” … by re-inserting the difference of the “sign” in the heart of the “originary”…’ (Derrida 1967a: 49n/ 2011: 39n).iv

This rethinking of time and space according to the logic of signification and differance amounts to an insistence on the originary priority of the sign as a condition of the possibility of *experience as such*: ‘A new transcendental aesthetic must itself be guided not only by mathematical idealities but by the possibility of inscriptions in general, not befalling an already constituted space as contingent accident but producing the spatiality of space’ (Derrida 1967a 411/ 1997: 290). Derrida thus reframes the Kantian claim that transcendental logic must be accompanied by a transcendental aesthetic—by an account of temporality and spatiality as originary conditions of the possibility of *judgment as such* because conditions of the possibility of the intuitions providing the material to be judged—and includes the possibility of *inscription* as a condition of the possibility of *intuition* as such.v Such a radical rethinking of the fundamental forms of experience moves so far
beyond the Kantian or Husserlian senses of the term, that Derrida himself insists it ‘ought no longer

to call itself a transcendental aesthetic, neither in the Kantian, nor in the Husserlian, sense of those


This linking of space and time to inscription and signification allows Derrida to continue to

maintain that the inquiry into ideal Sinne is always already interdependent with the semiotic system

of meanings qua Bedeutungen, (word-meaning, for Husserl; explain) since this system itself cannot

be neatly separated from time and space as the conditions of the possibility of all experience. In

this later work Derrida is still seeking to show that phenomenology’s reliance on the “metaphysics

of presence” can only be overcome through a (quasi-) turn to the existential and the “concrete.”

As Derrida recognized, Husserl's original phenomenological conception of meaning was

not limited to word- or propositional-meaning and its directly associated structures; it encompassed

other more primordial “inexact” aspects of meaning prior to exact fixed Bedeutungen occurring by

means of language. Derrida effectively takes Husserl's conception of the sedimentation of exact

intersubjective meanings by means of language—one part of Husserl's broader and not exclusively

language-oriented theory of meaning—as the cornerstone of phenomenology's theory of meaning en
toto: “Can we hold out for the possibility of a pure and purely self-present identity at the level

Husserl wanted to disengage as a level of pre-expressive experience, that is, the level of sense prior
to Bedeutung and expression? It would be easy to show that such a possibility is excluded at the

very root of transcendental experience.” In an ontology of signs as a system of differences without

positive terms, there is no room for an account of independently meaningful structures at a pre-
predicative, pre-linguistic level, and this means, in effect, that the deconstructive focus on

signification has obliterated the phenomenological role of Sinn as a transcendental indicator of

basic significance.

In light of this, accounts such as those of the affect theorists mentioned above as well as

that of Husserl—accounts that locate an originary conception of presence in structures of embodied

significance purportedly outside of language and representation, should be defended against

Derrida’s powerful and highly influential critique of the possibility of pre- or non-linguistic

experience.

Limiting the Scope of the Derridean Reduction

The first step in in doing so is to note that if we do not, with Derrida, hold a prior conviction of the

truth of the logic of contamination, trace, and originary difference, it remains an open question

whether the Derridan Transcendental Aesthetic is phenomenologically accurate in terms of our

lived experience. Is it really phenomenologically evident that lived experience holds no

significance independently of the logic of signification? Is there really nothing outside the text?

Such a level of lived experience is described explicitly in the final pages of Formal and

Transcendental Logic, one of the places in his later work where Husserl lays claim to his own


conceived of this as an expansion of the Kantian notion, arguing that the phenomenological field of

lived experience could not be accurately understood on the basis of the a priori forms of intuition of
time and space alone. If—as Husserl thought—the Kantian account of the presentational origin of

meaningful judgments in space and time as the a priori forms of intuition is explanatory only with

regard to the conditions of the possibility of Newtonian science, the transcendental

phenomenologist, who is concerned not only with the apodictic grounding of natural scientific

inquiry but with the wider project of grounding the constitution of meaning as such, proposes a

radical rethinking of the entire field of intuition. Kant's account begins ‘too high’ from a Husserlian
standpoint, because it is concerned primarily to explain exact scientific concepts. It thereby misses the more orignary phenomenological dimension of meaning consisting of presentations of sense in the life-world. And whereas Kant's account of intuition in the first Critique was conceived with an eye to the exact concepts of natural science, Derrida's version of intuition—itself an attempt to limit the role of intuitionism in phenomenology—is conceived with an eye to the semiotic structures of différance and signification. It is conceivable, then, that Derrida's account of intuition also begins ‘too high,’ missing fundamental experiential structures by refusing to countenance elements of significance not already ‘contaminated’ by the structure of signification. If Kant’s demarcation of the transcendental aesthetic has been gerrymandered for Newton, is Derrida’s perhaps gerrymandered for Saussure?

If this this is right, Derrida may be too hasty in his proclamation that the “unity of sound and voice… is the sole case to escape the distinction between what is worldly and what is transcendental. And in Speech and Phenomena it is Derrida’s claim to the uniqueness of this case, and not merely the claim that the voice exhibits this simultaneously worldly and transcendental structure, that allowed Derrida to reach the final conclusion of an always-already contaminated origin and to tie the structure of trace to signification. Thus if there were originary structures in lived experience other than the voice that 1) similarly escape of the distinction between the worldly and the transcendental, and 2) play a role in the constitution of meaning without reliance upon the structure or logic of signification, this would constitute an important challenge to the Derridean reduction of significance to signification. In what (little time) follows I want to briefly argue that both criteria are met by Husserl’s account of kinaesthesis.

In his own expansion of the transcendental aesthetic, Husserl insisted that the intuition of Sinn is structured not only by the content of the intentional object itself but also by affects and kinaestheses:

I move my eyes, my head, alter the posture of my body, go around the object, direct my regard to it, and so on. We call these movements, which belong to the essence of perception and serve to bring the object of perception to givenness from all sides insofar as possible, kinaesthese. They are consequences of perceptive tendencies, “activities” in a certain sense, although not voluntary actions. […] the kinaesthese involved have the character of an active, subjective process. (Husserl 1964a: 89-90/ 1973: 83-84)

For Husserl, embodied lived experience functions not only as an originary constitution of subjectivity, a result of constitution; it is also and more primordially an aspect of experience that plays a constituting role. Kinaesthesis and affection, our embodied ways of being-in-the-world, are among the “habitualities” that make up the conditions of the possibility of the presentation of basic signification or Sinngebung by orienting the intentional gaze in accordance with which objects of intuition are given. I do not perceive significances; I perceive because of them. I do not perceive pre-linguistic meanings; I constitute meaning because I am embodied being living in a world that I already engage as meaningful.

Embodied kinaesthetic and affective structures are thus not fully propositional or signifying, and we are not necessarily actively conscious of them, but nor are they merely third-personally observable “worldly” processes, since they precede the very constitutive overlappings in the lifeworld on the basis of which objective experience is first possible:

All the levels and strata through which the syntheses, intentionally overlapping as they are from subject to subject, are interwoven form a universal unity of synthesis; through it the
objective universe comes to be—the world which is and as it is concretely and vividly given (and pre-given for all possible praxis). [...] The world is a spatiotemporal world; 
spatiotemporality (as “living,” not as logicomathematical) belongs to its own ontic 
meaning as life-world. (Husserl 1970: 167-168/ Hua VI: 171-172)

This “pre-objective” lifeworld—as opposed to the exact world of science—is characterized by 
“prominences” that allow for original synthetic associations by means of what Husserl in the above 
passage calls “living” as opposed to “logicomathematical” reality, the lifeworld of doings or 
original forms of experiencing understood as activity. As Claesges puts it, the spatiotemporality of 
the original lifeworld “is not logical-mathematical spatiotemporality, but lifeworldly 
spatiotemporality, indeed in its primordial form.”

As “lived” spatiotemporal structures that are at the same time conditions of the possibility 
of Sinngebung, these habitualities are, in Derrida’s terms, both “worldly” and “transcendental,” and 
they function at an unconscious level that seems to be prior to and not dependent upon the structure 
of signification; their manifestations of basic significance do not rely on the facticity of writing or 
the concrete primordiality of “voice,” but on my lived and embodied being in the world.

Husserl’s phenomenological account of the whole set of structural conditions necessary for 
the theory of meaning thus includes elements of experience indexed not to intersubjectively shared 
meanings (the structure of signification internal to the analysis Bedeutung) but to the prior and 
nonetheless intersubjective and normative bodily navigation of basic significances prerequisite for 
Bedeutungen. These structures of embodied experience do not present specific, neatly delineable 
meaning content but only indications of meaningfulness, conditions for the possibility of Sinn 
prior to the making thematic of meaning through signification.

I contend that a recognition of these kinaesthetic and affective “habitualities” are enough to 
guarantee an intersubjective investment in the non-signifying basic significance of the world by 
showing that we as embodied beings move and feel in the world in a way that is not exhaustively 
“contaminated” by structures of signification: If Derrida's insistence on the primacy of différance 
even at the level of basic sensory intuition in lived experience is right, such a claim about a 
structure of meaningfulness that precedes discrete meanings would be impossible; it would be 
beyond the reach of phenomenology’s “internal limit.” But if the above account is correct, it looks 
instead as if Derrida's attempt to bring Husserl's abstract eidoses down to earth—recapturing 
meaning in “concrete” existence through the temporality and spatiality of writing and voice— 
results in a refusal to conceive of meaning’s relation to the most concrete level of experience: that 
which is experientially lived through bodily sensation and affection.

I don’t think this should lead us to a rejection of Derrida's analysis of sedimentation by 
means of the sign system and the resultant structure of différence, which is both an important 
contribution to phenomenology and largely convincing, as far as it goes. But it does raise the 
question of how far that Derridean analysis should be understood to go. It amounts to a questioning 
Derrida's claim to have established the contamination of all meaning by the structure of 
signification by rejecting the notion that the deconstruction of Husserl's theory of signs should be 
seen as an exhaustive account of meaning understood phenomenologically. It suggests that 
Derrida's theory of meaning appears is not so much invalid as incomplete: it ignores the body and 
the pre-linguistic.

In this talk I have tried to sketch very broadly one way in which another dimension of
meaning analysis may be open to us through the consideration of embodied aspects of experience that seem to be more primordial than language or the sign-system; aspects not definable in terms of third-personal scientific conceptions of space and time, and yet intersubjectively shared and normative with respect to the embodied significance of lived experience. It is here that Husserlian phenomenology exceeds the resources of the deconstructive account of meaning and anticipates both the return to embodiment and affect in the wake of deconstruction's heyday and the broader pendulum swing back from the linguistic turn; it calls for looking beyond the linguistic and semiotic prejudices of the later twentieth century, and turning back to the significance of the things themselves.

2 Janack, What we Mean by Experience, 121, with ref to Alcoff, “Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience.”

iii The argument for this claim, found in chapter six of Voice and Phenomenon, can be reconstructed as follows:

(1) Ideality presupposes temporal difference or ‘temporalization’: Since ‘according to Husserl, the omnitemporality of ideal objects is but a mode of temporality,’ and since ideal objects are constituted on the basis of a presentation of sense (Sinn) in the flux of temporal experience, ‘even prior to being expressed, the sense is through and through temporal’ (Derrida 1967b: 93/ 2011: 71).

(2) This ‘temporalization’ co-implies auto-affection: ‘As soon as we take account of the movement of temporalization ... it is necessary to use the concept of pure auto-affection, the concept that Heidegger uses’ because the ‘source-point’ the ‘originary impression,’ that on the basis of which the movement of temporalization is produced is already pure auto-affection (Derrida 1967b: 93/ 2011: 71). As Derrida notes, according to Husserl himself the primal impression is ‘generated ... through spontaneous generation. It does not grow up (it has no seed)’ (Husserl 1964b/ 1969b, qtd. Derrida 1967b: 94/ 2011: 72). Since this temporalization is not affected or generated by anything else, it is ‘already pure auto-affection.’

(3) Such auto-affection is only possible on the basis of (i.e. itself presupposes) the unity of sound and voice: ‘The unity of the sound and the voice, which allows the voice to produce itself in the world as pure auto-affection, is the unique instance that escapes from the distinction between intramundanity and transcendentality; and by the same token, it makes this distinction possible’ (Derrida 1967b: 89/ 2011: 68).

(4) Thus temporalization (temporal difference) itself is only possible on the basis of the unity of sound and voice.

The argument is then extended to also establish the co-originarity of spatial difference:

(5) The temporalization of ideality (from 1) presupposes ‘spacing’/ the spatial: ‘As soon as we admit spacing both as “interval” or difference and as openness upon the outside, there can no longer be any absolute inside, for the “outside” has insinuated itself into the movement by which the inside of the nonspatial, which is called “time,” appears, is constituted, is “presented.” Space is “in” time; it is time's pure leaving-itself; it is the “outside-itself” as the self-relation of time’ (Derrida 1967b: 95/ 2011: 73).

(6) Auto-affection itself presupposes spacing, since the auto-affection of the voice is co-implicated in temporalization (2) which presupposes spacing (5).

(7) The ‘unity of sound and voice’ is thus a precondition of auto-affection and temporalization (3), but itself presupposes spatial difference (‘spacing’) (6), and thus there can be no ‘pure interiority of speech’; speech is always somehow differing or outside of itself: ‘If we now remember that the pure interiority of phonic auto-affection assumed the purely temporal nature of the “expressive” process, we see that the theme of a pure interiority of speech, or of “hearing oneself speak” is radically contradicted by “time” itself. Even the exiting “into the world” is also originarily implied in the movement of temporalization’ (Derrida 1967b: 96/ 2011: 74).

vi Cf. Rump 2014

Claesges 1964: 121, my translation.