Derrida in Debate with Husserl and Heidegger: Review of Françoise Dastur’s Déconstruction et phénoménologie

Françoise Dastur

Déconstruction et phénoménologie: Derrida en débat avec Husserl et Heidegger.

In spite of the word debate in the subtitle of Françoise Dastur’s new book, the work itself is a sympathetic close reading of Derrida’s responses to Husserl and Heidegger. Its method involves a scrutinizing of Derrida’s earliest seminars and published articles on the two phenomenologists, for example, the master’s thesis of 1957 on “The Problem of Genesis in the Philosophy of Husserl,” the long introduction in 1962 to Husserl’s “Origin of Geometry,” up to the published books of 1967 and 1972 and on through Derrida’s work during the 1980s. The only wish a reader might have is that a sequel appear that would give an equally careful response to two things, namely, (1) Derrida’s treatment of Merleau-Ponty in all its instances and (2) Derrida’s work of the 1990s and early 2000s generally. Merleau-Ponty’s voice rises often in the “debate” conducted here, but because Derrida, especially early on in his career, resisted Merleau-Ponty so strongly, only later in works such as Memoirs of the Blind and Touching Jean-Luc Nancy reflecting on Merleau-Ponty’s work in a more considered and generous way, and, finally, since Dastur is one of Merleau-Ponty’s most perceptive readers, there is need of such a Merleau-Pontian sequel. Furthermore, in my view at least, Derrida’s response to phenomenology continues to develop and deepen up through his very last seminar, The Beast and the Sovereign, so that a sequel is once again called for.

A sympathetic close reading is what we have here, yes, but with a caveat expressed in the Preface and several times in the book itself. Dastur confesses
her admiration of Derrida, who was an early teacher of hers, and a remarkable teacher at that, and also her appreciation of Derrida’s vast body of work; yet she also is critical with regard to Derrida’s “use and misuse” of “the school of suspicion” in his response to phenomenology. This initial remark surprised me, inasmuch as I have always taken Derrida’s involvement in the “school” or “hermeneutic” of suspicion to account for the very best of his insights. Marx, Nietzsche, Freud—what would Derrida be without them? If these thinkers, along with linguists such as Saussure, Jakobson, and Hjelmslev, and writers such as Blanchot and Genet, appear to be “outsiders” to the phenomenological tradition, their contribution to deconstruction seems to me invaluable. If Dastur is disquieted by Derrida’s “permeability” with regard to “exterior influences” (42), I myself believe that the richness of the “outside” is what phenomenology, wedded as it is to interiorization, intellectualism, transcendentality, and ideality, often enough neglects at its own peril. That said, I do not see, as I read Dastur’s chapters themselves, that excessive discomfiture concerning “the school of suspicion” is there, nor much of a critique of Derrida’s putative “misuse” of the school. And I have to admit that this pleases me very much. It is fair to say that Dastur devotes her considerable talents and her immense learning to elaborating the major challenges of Derridian deconstruction to phenomenology.

The present book has seven chapters, and in what follows I will try to summarize only a few of its findings. At the outset, however, let me make an appeal to university presses in the English-speaking world: this book should be translated, since it provides an education for every reader of phenomenological philosophy, whether neophyte or veteran.

Chapter one, “Finitude and Repetition in Husserl and Derrida,” begins by affirming a continuity in Derrida’s response to phenomenology: from beginning to end that response involves “the same experience of the disruption of presence” (14). At the outset of his career, Derrida resists Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the later Husserl’s embrace of the Lebenswelt and focuses instead on the inadequacy of Husserl’s “genetic” phenomenology, especially the paradoxical effort to offer an account of the genesis of the “supratemporal” (15). Already in his master’s thesis Derrida is struck by “the ‘originary contamination’ of the mundane and the transcendental, which constantly threatens the phenomenological enterprise” (16). Years later, in an essay on Artaud that is contemporary with his writing of Voice and Phenomenon, Derrida declares his lifelong fascination with “the indefinite movement of finitude, of the unity of life and death, of difference, of originary repetition, which is to say, the origin of tragedy as the absence of a simple origin” (18, citing L’écriture et la différence, 364). This is the passage that gives Dastur the title of her chapter, and