

## Book Review

Paul Downes, *Concentric Space as a Life Principle Beyond Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Ricoeur. Inclusion of the Other* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020)

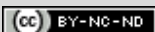
Paolo Furia

Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Università degli Studi di Torino

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 13, No 2 (2022), pp. 147-150

ISSN 2156-7808 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2022.618

<http://ricœur.pitt.edu>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

## Book Review

Paul Downes, *Concentric Space as a Life Principle Beyond Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Ricoeur. Inclusion of the Other* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020)

Paolo Furia

Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Università degli Studi di Torino

Paul Downes's *Concentric space as a life principle beyond Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Ricoeur* is premised on an original and ambitious hypothesis: that at the basis of human experience, language, and thought lay spatial structures that are primordial and pre-categorical. The author pinned down the main tenets of this argument in the 2012 book *The Primordial Dance: Diametric and Concentric Spaces in the Unconscious World*. In that work, both cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis were summoned to chart the largely undiscovered dimension of the spatial structures fuelling both human experience and thought. Downes then used those spatial structures to reinterpret the work of philosophers such as Heidegger and Derrida. In *Concentric space as a life principle*, the author fundamentally continues what he began in 2012 by applying the interpretative framework based on spatial structures to the philosophies of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Ricoeur.

Downes's work develops in three steps. First: structures exist and must be interpreted as spaces. Second: space is not a uniform substance but is inherently articulated in two kinds of spatial relations, namely concentric spaces of assumed inclusion and diametric spaces of assumed exclusion or separation. Third: the interplays between concentric and diametric structures resurface with special intensity in the work of some philosophers, even when they were not fully aware of these structures. The selected philosophers are Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Ricoeur. What most stands out about this book is its ability to keep together both a very detailed level of textual analysis and an innovative and profound theoretical ambition. According to that ambition, it would be possible, in principle, to reinterpret any philosophy that has been elaborated by human thought, for spatial structures are intended to give shape to both human experiences and thought in general. It is possible that Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Ricoeur are chosen because of the peculiar spatial resonances of their discourses; however, considering that space is viewed as "indelibly interactive and immanent in thought" (p. 6), they can be reinterpreted in the light of prior spatial structures because such structures are the purported structures of thought itself.

It is not by chance that Downes begins his discussion with Levi-Strauss and takes his structuralist approach into account: the reader can feel something more than just a family resemblance between Downes's overall project and the structuralist attitude. At the same time, well aware of the criticisms raised by the hermeneutic tradition against structuralism's denial of movement and change,<sup>1</sup> Downes emphasizes the spatial character of the fundamental structures, whereas Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of structures remains ingrained within a linguistic

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, C. Lévi Strauss, P. Ricoeur, et al., *Autour de la Pensée sauvage. Réponses à quelques questions*. Entretien du "groupe philosophique" d'*Esprit* avec Claude Lévi-Strauss, Nov. 1963.

framework that is cognitive and essentially non-spatial. So, in Downes's project, the individuation of anthropological structures that lay beyond the experiential and the conceptual constructions of human life and thought remains consistent with the structuralist approach; what is more akin to phenomenology is the idea that such structures overlap, interact, interlock and change, like spaces, unfolding in pre-categorical interplays between shapes, background and foreground levels, depths and surfaces. The general aim of the book is to integrate experience and language into space. Downes's work can therefore be considered an original contribution to the spatial turn, nowadays greatly discussed in human sciences and philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

Already in the 1990s, the American geographer Ed Soja complained that Western philosophy has often treated space as "something fixed, lifeless, immobile, a mere background or stage of the human drama, an external and eternal complication of our own choosing" (1996: 196). Against this tendency, Soja maintained that a spatial turn in the social sciences (and the humanities in general) is necessary to correctly assess the power of space in giving shape to life, meanings and actions. The focus on prior spatial structures also serves to decentre the human subject from its pretensions of mastering meanings and actions in order to acknowledge humans' ultimate dependence on a prior ontology of space from which human meanings and actions emerge. In other words, space is not simply a neutral, homogeneous, isotropic backdrop of things and people that can be encapsulated into a Cartesian grid. From these premises, in the wake of Heidegger, philosophers such as Ed Casey (1996) and Jeff Malpas (2009) have retrieved the notion of "place" as the ontological source of the always already situated being-in-the-world. Downes himself remarks that "a living space as a dynamic interacting background is in stark contrast with a Cartesian conception of space as 'empty' and a 'mere nonentity'" (p. 162). He also acknowledges that "a spatial turn is increasingly recognised across the social sciences aided and abetted by commentators on Heidegger that aptly emphasise the central importance of space in Being and Time" (ibid.). However, Downes distances himself from the work of those commentators precisely on the role of place, which is scarcely underlined in Downes's argument. Downes sees in Malpas's focus on place a flattening of "the dimensionality that space offers conceptually" (p. 163): he understands place as "mere location" (ibid.). Nonetheless, from a Heideggerian standpoint, place could be hardly reduced to mere location: as Casey shows in *Getting Back into Place* (2009, 2<sup>o</sup> ed.), place as mere location is the other side of the coin of Cartesian space, in which locations are just positions singled out by a couple of coordinates. A fair phenomenological notion of place instead starts from considering the embodied and embedded character of the human being that moves around and orients herself in space and, by means of those movements and orientation processes, provides space with affective and symbolic value and meanings. Place is the real cradle of human existence and comes before mathematized space, which is always an intellectual abstraction intended to bring about technical and instrumental aims such as calculating distances or discovering spatial laws concerning the distribution and diffusion of populations, goods, and supplies. To attain that level of abstraction, the affective, qualitative, symbolic, historical dimensions of place must necessarily be bracketed. If a full-fledged phenomenological account of space retrieves the primordial character of place that gives shape and order to experience, Downes chooses not to go down that road. The scope of his work seems to be somehow metaphysical, in

---

<sup>2</sup> A good overview of the spatial turn across disciplines is provided by B. Warf and S. Arias (eds), *The Spatial Turn. Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Routledge, 2014).

the sense that there are logical, ideal structures underlying both experience and thought. To avoid Platonism, those structures are understood in dynamic terms: their overlaps re-emerge within experience and conscious thought, but overall, they operate in the dark, at the unconscious layer that lies beyond the linguistic and the representational. It can be argued that Downes's challenge consists in reconciling life and form, to borrow the great conceptual tension traced by Georg Simmel. In Downes's argument, life is governed by forms, and not the reverse: this is sufficient to disqualify Downes as a vitalist. At the same time, forms are conceived in dynamic terms: Downes argues that forms include not only stability, identity and rigidity, but also dynamism, transformation, and life. In this respect, the articulation of space into two major patterns of structures – namely, the diametric and the concentric spaces – represents a way to rephrase common Western assumptions on space by highlighting its complexity and inherent dynamism.

Both diametric and concentric structures are relational and transsubjective. However, diametric and concentric spaces differ in their specific relational modes. On the one hand, diametric structures are oppositional in that they maintain a certain distance between the connected poles, which remain essentially self-fulfilled and divided from each other. On the other hand, concentric structures include the other in the constitution of the self, thereby implying a stronger relational mode of comingling and connection. Since these structures are understood as spaces, the difference between diametric and concentric structures primarily concerns their boundaries. If, on one hand, diametric spaces are clearly distinct from each other, the boundaries between concentric spaces are more porous and crossable. Downes also provides a geometrical interpretation of concentric and diametric spaces: "A diametric spatial structure is one where a circle is split in half by a line that is its diameter or where a square or rectangle is similarly divided into two equal halves. In a concentric spatial structure, one circle is inscribed in another larger circle" (p. 17). It is useful to keep in mind those geometric images when reading, for instance, the dense pages devoted to the interpretation of Schopenhauer's theory of compassion, characterized by a concentric spatial relation of mutual implication of the self and the other, which stands against the world as representation, where the principium individuationis embodies a diametric structure of identification and separation between elements in space. Yet, the geometric images of spatial structures may be misleading as they do not adequately capture the inherent dynamism of the structures. Indeed, both diametric and concentric spaces are also movements: the diametric structures should rather be seen as linear expansions where something is excluded and isolated, whereas the concentric structures are to be seen as circular expansions of relations and inclusion. However, they are connected, mutually chained and entwined: "each space resists the movement of the other" (p. 127). The delicate balance between diametric and concentric spaces can collapse, and the movements of both can destroy each other. Diametric spatial structures in particular can be "a wound to concentric space and a scar emerging from this wound" (p. 128). At the same time, diametric space can also "extinguish itself as a process of self-destruction through the very imposition of its own splitting process on itself" (p. 129). As an example, this is the case for much of the Nietzschean speculation about the will to power, where the diametric logic of Nietzsche's discourse (the contraposition and even the inversion between the good and the evil, the real and the apparent, the true and the illusory) falls into a kind of monism which ultimately destroys life and its very conditions of possibility. This does not necessarily mean that concentric space is deterministically linked to life and diametric space with death and destruction. When the relational and inclusive logic of the concentric structure goes so far as to disrupt the boundaries between

elements, which Downes claims happens with Nietzsche's interpretation of the Dionysian, the selves fuse into a totality that is ultimately not compatible with human life, which is characterized by a sense of finitude and vulnerability instead. Consequently, the boundaries between the selves may be challenged and widened, as it happens in Schopenhauer's compassion, where a residual sense of the self is preserved thanks to its constitutive relation to the other's suffering. Downes's reference to Ricoeur's thought could not be more opportune: indeed, the precarious balance between concentric openness and diametric closure echoes the idem/ipse distinction elaborated in *Oneself as Another* (1990). Even so, Downes chooses not to focus on those parts of *Oneself as Another* in which Ricoeur broaches the articulation between sameness and ipseity, preferring instead to introduce a more complex discussion concerning the Tenth Study, in which Ricoeur portrays an ontology of dynamis drawing on both Spinoza's ontological insights and Heidegger's theory of care. In a way, this choice confirms the real scope of Downes's argument: to sketch a general interpretation of both the world and the self in terms of spatial concentric and diametric structures.

Over and above the many learned interpretations of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Ricoeur carried out in his book, the most challenging aspect of Downes's proposal lies precisely in his refiguration of the world of experience, language and ideas in spatial structural terms. It is debatable whether Downes's attempt to frame both form and movement, stability and metamorphosis into a general theory of prior spatial structures is entirely successful. Yet, his contribution is undoubtedly thought-provoking and worthy of being taken into account by any scholar who dedicates her research to spatial issues.