

Chapter 1

Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: A Reappraisal

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Abstract: Many Merleau-Ponty scholars have questioned the validity of Merleau-Ponty's Husserl-interpretation. In contrast, this paper argues that Merleau-Ponty's reading was ahead of its time and has been confirmed to a very large extent by recent Husserl scholarship. This is shown in detail through a presentation of Husserl's late reflections on reduction, constitution, embodiment, passivity, and intersubjectivity, reflections which are primarily to be found in posthumously published manuscripts.

If one comes to *Phénoménologie de la perception* after having read *Sein und Zeit* (or *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*), one will be in for a surprise. Both works contain a number of both implicit and explicit references to Husserl, but the presentation they give is so utterly different that one might occasionally wonder whether they are referring to the same author. Thus nobody can overlook that Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl differs significantly from Heidegger's. It is far more charitable. In fact, when evaluating the merits of Husserl and Heidegger respectively, Merleau-Ponty often goes very much against the standard view. This is not only the case in his notorious remark on the very first page of *Phénoménologie de la perception*, where he declares that the whole of *Sein und Zeit* is nothing but an explication of Husserl's notion of lifeworld, but also—to give just one further example—in one of his Sorbonne lectures, where Merleau-Ponty writes that Husserl took the issue of historicity far more seriously than Heidegger.¹

1. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), i; *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962; revised, 1981), vii [cited hereafter as PhP, with French preceding English pagination]; Merleau-Ponty, *Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne: Résumé de cours 1949–1952* (Paris: Cynara, 1988), 421–2; “Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man,” trans. John Wild, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 94–5.

1. Husserl and the Merleau-Pontyans

My point of departure will be the surprising fact that a large number of Merleau-Ponty scholars have questioned the validity of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl. Let me illustrate this with a few references.

In his book, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, Gary Madison writes that Merleau-Ponty in the central essay "The Philosopher and His Shadow" attempts to unearth the implications of Husserl's late philosophy and to think his "unthought thought." But as he then continues, "the essay is no doubt more interesting for what it tells us about Merleau-Ponty's own late thought."² Thus, according to Madison, the essay is not so much about what Husserl did say, as it is about what he should have said, and it must consequently be read as an exposition of Merleau-Ponty's own thoughts rather than as a genuine Husserl-interpretation (Madison, 213, 330). And as he then adds: "I do not mean to say that Merleau-Ponty completely misunderstood Husserlian philosophy . . . but only that he did not want or could not believe that Husserl was nothing more than the idealist he was" (Madison, 271).

In Martin Dillon's book, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, we find a similar interpretation. Speaking of the same essay from 1959, he writes: "Just as he finds his own thought in the unthought of Husserl, the Husserl Merleau-Ponty finds reason to praise is frequently an extrapolation of his own philosophy."³ And Dillon then basically continues along the same line as Madison: If Husserl had rigorously pursued the ontological implications of the notion of the lifeworld that he set forth in *Krisis* "he might have altered his own transcendental idealism (with all its latent solipsism) and arrived at a position similar to Merleau-Ponty's. But the fact is that Husserl never abandoned the reductions or the idealism to which they inevitably lead" (Dillon, 87).

To mention just one more example, in his book *Sense and Subjectivity: A Study of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty*, Philip Dwyer writes that although Merleau-Ponty occasionally tries to make excuses for Husserl and even distorts his doctrine in order to make it more palatable, the fact remains that

2. Gary B. Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 170.

3. M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 27.

for the most part, Husserl's work was antithetical to Merleau-Ponty's.⁴ And as Dwyer then concludes: "In my view, what, for the most part, Husserl meant by and practiced as 'phenomenology' can only be described as giving new meaning to the word 'muddled.' The less said about the details of Husserl's philosophy the better" (Dwyer, 34).

Given Merleau-Ponty's persistent and rather enthusiastic (though by no means uncritical) interest in Husserl—an occupation that lasted throughout his life, and which actually increased rather than diminished in the course of time⁵—this unwillingness among Merleau-Ponty scholars to take his Husserl-interpretation seriously is somewhat astonishing. Why is there such certainty that the philosophies of the two are antithetical, and that Merleau-Ponty must have misrepresented Husserl's position more or less knowingly in order to make it less offensive? Some of the reasons have already been mentioned. In the eyes of a number of Merleau-Ponty scholars, Husserl remained an intellectualist, an idealist, and a solipsist to the very end, regardless of what Merleau-Ponty might have said to the contrary.

If we take another look at Madison's and Dillon's accounts, we will basically encounter a criticism of Husserl that seems to owe much more to Heidegger's reading of Husserl than to Merleau-Ponty's. In their view, Husserl held on to the idea of a self-transparent transcendental ego that could be fully disclosed through systematic reflection (Dillon, 31). This transcendental ego was moreover conceived along the lines of a transcendental onlooker for whom its own body, worldly things, and other subjects would be but constituted objects spread out before its gaze (Madison, 38). Thus Dillon and Madison imply that Husserl understood transcendental subjectivity as a sovereign spirit which reigns supremely over the world as its original

4. Philip Dwyer, *Sense and Subjectivity. A Study of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 33–4.

5. For a careful account of the different phases of Merleau-Ponty's Husserl-reading see Toadvine's Appendix "Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview" in this volume. The issue of Merleau-Ponty's own development raises a question that I will be unable to pursue in this paper, namely, the relation between his early and later thought. Madison and Dillon disagree on this point, and for that reason draw different conclusions when it concerns Husserl's influence on Merleau-Ponty. Whereas Dillon emphasizes the continuity between *Phénoménologie de la perception* and *Le Visible et l'invisible*, Madison denies it. Consequently, Dillon claims that Merleau-Ponty's break with Husserlian phenomenology is already to be found in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, whereas Madison actually argues that Merleau-Ponty's position in that work does not differ in any radical way from Husserl's (!), and that all the supposed shortcomings of the work are due to that fact (Madison, 32, 226).

creator and as the final judge of truth and value (Madison, 101; Dillon, 170). Husserl consequently remained an immanentist and an intellectualist. He never realized the significance of the Other, he never understood the problem of passivity, and he never acknowledged the role of the body, but unto the very end located the sole constitutive foundation in the pure agency of the transcendental ego (Madison, 213; Dillon, 58, 146, 113).

On what textual basis do Madison and Dillon found this interpretation? Unfortunately both of them seem to consider the criticism they express to be so very much the received opinion that they deem a thorough documentation to be unnecessary. This is in particular the case for Madison, whose work contains amazingly few references to Husserl's own writings. The situation is slightly better in Dillon, but even he does not always bother to substantiate his criticism, and when he finally does, the only works he refers to are from the usual group, i.e., *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, *Ideen I*, *Cartesianische Meditationen* and *Krisis*. For somebody not familiar with Husserl's writings, this might seem to be more than sufficient, but, as any Husserl scholar will know, the fact that Dillon does not refer to the posthumously published material makes a decisive difference. Not only does it imply that he never refers to the work by Husserl that had the greatest impact on Merleau-Ponty, namely *Ideen II*, but neither does he draw on volumes like *Erste Philosophie II*, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis*, or *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität I–III*, all of which contain material that are highly pertinent when it comes to the issues that Merleau-Ponty claimed to find in Husserl.

As has been known for a long time, thanks to Van Breda's article, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty et les Archives-Husserl à Louvain," Merleau-Ponty had access to some of Husserl's unpublished manuscripts very early on. In fact, when he arrived in Louvain in April 1939, he was the very first outsider to visit the Husserl-Archives, and his interest in Husserl's research manuscripts persisted until the very end. The reason for this was undoubtedly that he saw the main thrust of Husserl's work to be contained in these manuscripts. As he wrote in a letter from 1942: "After all, Husserl's philosophy is almost entirely contained in the unpublished manuscripts. . . ."⁶ A remark that merely echoes Husserl's own estimation. As Husserl writes to Adolf Grimme

6. Quoted in H. L. Van Breda, "Merleau-Ponty and the Husserl Archives at Louvain," in Merleau-Ponty, *Texts and Dialogues* ed. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry, Jr. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992), 155.

in 1931: "Indeed, the largest and, as I actually believe, most important part of my life's work still lies in my manuscripts, scarcely manageable because of their volume."⁷

To formulate my point more directly, I think the reason many Merleau-Ponty scholars have had difficulties in accepting Merleau-Ponty's visionary if not to say revolutionary interpretation of Husserl is because they, in contrast to Merleau-Ponty himself, failed to take Husserl's research manuscripts into account.⁸ I think Merleau-Ponty did in fact capture some important submerged tendencies in Husserl's thinking, tendencies which might not be very obvious if one sticks to the works published during Husserl's life, but which become overwhelmingly clear if one—as is nowadays a must—draws upon the volumes subsequently published in *Husserliana*. Thus to a certain extent, I will even argue that Merleau-Ponty did not go far enough. The publication of *Husserliana* has shown that Husserl did in fact think through some of the themes that Merleau-Ponty still took to belong to his unthought.

What I intend to do in the following is to pick out some of Merleau-Ponty's central assertions, and then try to match them with statements taken from Husserl's posthumously published works, i.e., from material not considered by Madison and Dillon.

- I will start off with Merleau-Ponty's claim that Husserl's phenomenological reduction might have more in common with Heidegger's emphasis on our Being-in-the-world than with any traditional idealism. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in the preface to *Phénoménologie de la perception*: The aim of the reduction is not to let us withdraw from the world in order to uncover a detached constituting consciousness but on the contrary to thematize our intentional rapport with the world—a relation that is so pervasive and tight that we normally fail to notice it (PhP viii–ix/xiii–xiv).
- I will next consider Merleau-Ponty's statement in *Signes* to the effect that Husserl eventually abandoned the idea of a static relationship between the

7. Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, *Husserliana*, vol. 15, ed. Iso Kern (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), lxvi [cited hereafter as Hua XV]. Translations of quotations from Husserl's untranslated works are my own.

8. Let me just add that I think the situation is changing. As some of the contributions in this volume attest, a number of younger Merleau-Ponty scholars are no longer ignoring Husserl's posthumously published writings.

Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl

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