

## Chapter 2

# Merleau-Ponty's Ontological Reading of Constitution in *Phénoménologie de la perception*

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## Study Project in Phenomenology of the Body

**Abstract:** *In Phénoménologie de la perception Merleau-Ponty constructs and critiques two notions of "constitution," both of which he ascribes to Husserl: an "intellectualist" sense that he rejects because it perpetuates a dualistic ontology of determinate being; and a "genetic" sense that is rejected on the grounds that it assumes an ultimately pre-given ontological matrix that it cannot itself provide. Thus Merleau-Ponty gives "constitution" an exclusively "metaphysical" reading, thereby occluding Husserl's distinctive methodological sense of the term.*

### 1. Issues and Strategies

Merleau-Ponty's "reading" of Husserl is simultaneously a "writing" of Husserl—a writing that appropriates and develops, but also deforms and occludes. Doing full justice to the richly textured sweep of this process is clearly beyond the compass of a single essay. I shall nevertheless attempt to identify one crucial strand in the fabric of Merleau-Ponty's Husserl-reading and to indicate one of the problems this reading raises, taking the way Merleau-Ponty uses the term "constitution" in *Phénoménologie de la perception* as a point of entry into this problem. A detailed survey of Merleau-Ponty's use of this concept in the text in question<sup>1</sup> reveals that at least four strategies are in play.

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1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962; reprint, with translation revisions by Forrest Williams, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1976). Since the term "constitution" is translated a number of ways in the English edition, the research project upon which the present essay is based relies solely upon the French edition. However, references to this work will provide French/English page numbers throughout. Unattributed page numbers throughout this essay refer to this work.

a. *The shifting senses of “constitution”*

The word “constitution” occurs literally hundreds of times in the text of *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Yet it is a chameleon concept, taking on different senses or nuances of sense against different backgrounds and shifting sense without warning, so that it can be used in significantly different senses in adjacent passages. For example, Merleau-Ponty makes no effort to distinguish between a technical and a non-technical sense of the word, and this functionally contributes to the prevailing climate of interpretation for the specifically technical senses, since it effectively prepares the reader to understand the philosophical import of the term according to the model of a mundane “making,” “assembling,” or “establishing.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the word “constitution” takes on distinctly different shades of meaning according to whether Merleau-Ponty is criticizing empiricism or intellectualism; proposing an alternative, existential account; or moving in the direction of an indirect ontology of indeterminate being. Yet these variegated senses are never truly thematized and clarified. And although Merleau-Ponty’s text does construct both an “earlier” and a “later” Husserl (with a different concept of constitution ascribed to each of them),<sup>3</sup> the overall trajectory of *Phénoménologie de la perception* is sustained as much by the ambiguities that tacitly blur and undermine the notion of “constitution” as by any explicit contrast between an “earlier” and a “later” sense of the term in Husserl.

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2. Cf. Thomas M. Seeböhm, “Intentionalität und passive Synthesis. Gedanken zu einer nichttranszendentalen Konzeption von Intentionalität,” in *Husserl in Halle. Spurensuche im Anfang der Phänomenologie*, ed. Hans-Martin Gerlach and Hans Rainer Sepp (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994), 68–9, on extra-philosophical senses of “constitution” in political and medical contexts.

3. Merleau-Ponty’s periodization of Husserl’s work in terms of a trajectory moving from logicism to existentialism (317 n. 1/274 n. 1; cf. 61 n. 1/49 n. 1, 63 n. 1/51 n. 1, 281 n. 1/243 n. 1)—albeit to an existentialism marred by “throwbacks” to earlier periods (419 n. 1/365 n. 1)—is structured by a narrative shape that expresses Merleau-Ponty’s own philosophical concerns in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, and this narrative does not always hold up in light of subsequent scholarship on Husserl’s texts; for example, in the 1945 work, Merleau-Ponty was unable to take into account that the 1928 version of the time lectures, edited by Stein and Heidegger, mingles manuscripts from different periods (cf., e.g., 178 n. 1/152 n. 1).

*b. The interpretive contexts already in play*

Scholars have characterized Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl in various ways; some suggest that Merleau-Ponty projects his own philosophical concerns back upon Husserl and "makes his predecessor into the spokesman for his own ideas,"<sup>4</sup> while others insist that Merleau-Ponty read Husserl far more accurately than the latter group of scholars have realized, since all the themes that Merleau-Ponty purports to find in Husserl (e.g., transcendental intersubjectivity) are in fact to be found there.<sup>5</sup> But both assessments are warranted, insofar as Merleau-Ponty was indeed correct in claiming that the themes in question appear in Husserl's writings, yet his understanding of these very themes (and of other themes in Husserl) is entirely mediated by the aims, motivations, and commitments governing his own philosophical project, rather than reflecting any attempt to provide an exposition of Husserl's work in and on its own terms.<sup>6</sup>

What is important here, however, is to acknowledge that the Husserl-reading at work in *Phénoménologie de la perception* is already informed by other Husserl-interpretations—most notably, by two currents of influence that we can designate the "Scheler-Stein" and the "Heidegger-Fink" lines of development. Thus the reading of Husserl that is written into the text of *Phénoménologie de la perception* is a further reading of a "pre-read" Husserl, i.e., of a Husserl who has already been inscribed and assimilated

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4. Peter J. Hadreas, *In Place of the Flawed Diamond: An Investigation of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 7.

5. See, e.g., Zahavi's contribution to the present volume.

6. Cf. ii/viii on constructing a "*phenomenology for ourselves*" based on the premise that "we find in texts only what we put into them"; see also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 160, 167, 201–2; *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 128, 133, 159–60, and cf. Edmund Husserl, *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1911–1921)*, *Husserliana*, vol. 25, ed. Thomas Nenon and Hans Rainer Sepp (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 207–8, for similar sentiments in Husserl—who does, however, distinguish this mode of "constructive" reading, undertaken to inspire one's own philosophical writing, from a scientifically motivated history of philosophy, which does indeed rely on philological interpretation and critique of the documents and traditions concerned: contrast Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Ergänzungsband: Texte aus dem Nachlass 1934–1937*, *Husserliana*, vol. 29, ed. Reinhold N. Smid (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 49–51 and 243–4.

into contexts critical of his work. It is obviously beyond the scope of this essay to document the influence of these interpretive contexts on Merleau-Ponty,<sup>7</sup> or to trace the fortunes of the notion of “constitution” in each of the four thinkers just mentioned. But two points may at least be indicated.

As we know, the Husserl-reading at work in *Phénoménologie de la perception* is based on unpublished as well as published works, with Stein’s edition of *Ideen II* playing a particularly important role. Stein, however, apparently thought that Husserl’s own notion of constitution required clarification, and in recasting the work, she deliberately steered it in the direction of a “non-idealistic” understanding of “constitution,” i.e., one in which the activity of “constitution” has irreducible ontological prerequisites.<sup>8</sup> Thus when Merleau-Ponty turned to *Ideen II*, he was turning to a text already bearing the imprint of a critique of constitutive phenomenology carried out from the standpoint of realistic phenomenology and its horizon of convictions—including the commitment to an ontology that precedes “phenomenology” per se.

The philosophical project in *Phénoménologie de la perception* is also decisively influenced by Heideggerian concerns, expressed not in any direct attack on Husserl from a Heideggerian position, but in Merleau-Ponty’s allegiance to Fink’s philosophical program, which calls for the results of specific phenomenological investigations initially carried out in an “ontologically disinterested” manner to be reinterpreted in light of the “metaphysical problem” that—according to Fink—“drives and moves Husserl’s philosophy,” i.e., the question of being (and in particular, that of

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7. It would be particularly interesting to examine the influence of Max Scheler, “Idealismus-Realismus,” *Philosophischer Anzeiger* 2 (Bonn: Verlag Friedrich Cohen, 1927), 255–93; “Idealism and Realism,” in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. David R. Lachterman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 288–356—a work that Merleau-Ponty does indeed cite in *Phénoménologie de la perception*—in this light, not only with regard to the general notion of knowledge as an ultimate, underivable, and participatory ontological relationship exemplified first of all in an “ecstatic” (*ekstatische*) form of knowledge prior to any reflection or conscious knowledge, but also with regard to Scheler’s overall approach to the “idealism”-“realism” controversy (cf. section 1.d. of the present paper).

8. See Marianne Sawicki, *Body, Text, and Science: The Literacy of Investigative Practices and the Phenomenology of Edith Stein* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), 73 ff., 153 ff.; cf. 164 n. 38.

the absolute origin of all being, prior to the “subject”-“object” framework).<sup>9</sup> Thus the appropriation and development of the notion of “constitution” that emerges in *Phénoménologie de la perception* is not only carried out in an ontological register, but follows hermeneutical phenomenology in relying on “interpretation” rather than “description” (even if what is being interpreted in an ontological light is itself the result of descriptive phenomenological investigation).

*c. The motif of the “incompletely constituted”*

The appropriation and development of “constitution” in *Phénoménologie de la perception* is effected not only by destabilizing the term and taking it as pre-inscribed within certain contexts of interpretation, but also by a complex rhetorical trajectory whose structure is reminiscent of a musical process of development wherein a motif is not simply repeated, but gradually transformed as its various potentials are exploited, so that it eventually becomes unrecognizable, or even—as in some works of Beethoven—is progressively dismantled until it disappears altogether. Merleau-Ponty appropriates the motif of the lived body as a “remarkably incompletely constituted thing” from *Ideen II*; transforms it into the motif of that which can never be an “object,” because it can *never* be “completely constituted”; extends this notion to time and to the world; links the motif of the “never completely constituted” with the notion of the “already constituted”; complements the critique of the constituted “object” with a rejection of any need for a constituting “subject”; and anticipates his later work in indirect ontology by limning the contours of an indeterminate being (i.e., a pre-objective realm that is never “completely constituted”) that is always necessarily *pre-given* (i.e., always “already constituted,” prior to any productive “constituting” operations on the part of a subject to/for whom it

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9. Eugen Fink, “Das Problem der Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 1 (1939), 256–7, and see also 236, 270; “The Problem of the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl,” trans. Robert M. Harlan, in *Apriori and World: European Contributions to Husserlian Phenomenology*, ed. William McKenna et al. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 44–5, and see also 29, 54; cf., e.g., Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975); *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), §5.

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