

Chapter 3

The Phenomenological Movement: A Tradition without Method? Merleau-Ponty and Husserl

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Abstract: Section I tries to analyze the ambivalence of Merleau-Ponty's references to Husserl. On the one hand, they indicate a deconstruction of Husserl's phenomenological method; on the other hand, there are attempts to "save" Husserl. Section II is a critical evaluation of Merleau-Ponty's account of the development of Husserl's phenomenology. Section III deals with his rejection of the reduction, the account of eidetic intuition, and intentionality. Section IV is an attempt to characterize the motives behind Merleau-Ponty's disinterest in method.

I. Preliminary Considerations

I say "preliminary considerations" because they introduce viewpoints of methodological hermeneutics, viewpoints for the analysis of literary traditions of philosophy in general. The phenomenological movement is a literary tradition, and what is at stake here is the development of this tradition between 1933 and, approximately, 1960, i.e., the period of texts written by Merleau-Ponty. He will be, of course, in the center of the following considerations.

Adolph Reinach's term "phenomenological movement," re-introduced by Herbert Spiegelberg in 1960, is in general accepted as a name for one of the most influential literary traditions of philosophy in the twentieth century. At least one phenomenologist has developed some doubts about the appropriateness of this historical category. Set aside that for German ears the term *Bewegung* now has a very bitter aftertaste if applied to a development having its roots in the first half of the twentieth century in Germany, the notion has some serious shortcomings. First, the phenomenological movement is no "school," and this means it is not determined by a system or, like German Idealism, by a sequence of systems in which changes are clearly articulated in the framework of a critique of the preceding systems. There seems to be something like a general principle guiding the phenomenological movement, namely "the return to the primary sources of direct intuition and to insights into essential structures (*Wesenseinsichten*) derived from them" taken from

the head of the *Jahrbuch für phänomenologische Forschung*.¹ But this "platform" defining phenomenology in the broad sense² includes only the intuition of *what* appears and not of *how* it appears, i.e., it includes not only most representatives of the Göttingen school but also the early Heidegger. The platform is the principle of phenomenology in the broad sense and must be distinguished from phenomenology in the strict sense. The "platform" has by no means the character of a strict methodical principle like, e.g., the principle guiding the development of classical empiricism from Locke to John Stuart Mill, "*nihil est in intellectu quod non ante fuerit in sensu*," determining the *how* in addition to the *what*. The question concerning Merleau-Ponty is whether he is only interested in the *what* and not also in the *how*. The *how* refers to the epistemological account of the givenness of different types of entities, including questions of methodological viewpoints. In Husserl, the *how* refers to the noetic aspect of his descriptions. The *what* refers to the contents of what is known about such entities. In Husserl, the latter is the noematic aspect. The two aspects cannot be separated according to Husserl.

Some methodological remarks are necessary before the discussion of this question. The concern at this point is not the problem of method in philosophy in general or in phenomenology. What is at stake is the methodology of the reconstruction of historical reality in the history of philosophy. The sources of the reconstruction, i.e., the "facts" of the historian, are in this case first of all texts.³

(1) One of the procedures guiding such research consists in starting with external criteria on the level of the lower hermeneutics before asking questions about the content of "what was meant," i.e., the questions of the "higher hermeneutics." The external criterion for the connection between texts are explicit and implicit references to other texts. The criterion is external because nothing is said about the positive application of the texts of

1. Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, vol. 1 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 5.

2. *The Phenomenological Movement*, vol. 1, 6.

3. For the general background of this approach, I refer to J. Gustav Droysen, *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1, ed. Peter Ley (Stuttgart: Frommann/Holzboog, 1977). For information concerning methodological hermeneutics in the 19th Century, cf. Hans Ineichen, *Philosophische Hermeneutik*, Handbuch Philosophie, ed. Elisabeth Ströker and Wolfgang Wieland (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1991), part B, sections I–IV. Cf. also my "Boeckh and Dilthey. The Development of Methodical Hermeneutics," in *Phenomenology and the Human Sciences*, ed. J. N. Mohanty (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985).

the tradition or negative critical rejection or a certain, sometimes, as we will see, highly complex mixture of both on the level of the higher text hermeneutics. There is the extreme case of complete rejection, e.g., Descartes's rejection of scholasticism and also the art of rhetoric of the humanists as examples of scientific philosophy. Complete rejection is often followed by complete negligence and forgetting of the old tradition that is now considered dead and of interest only from a historical point of view.

Spiegelberg introduced a distinction between phenomenology in the *broad* sense and phenomenology in the *broadest* sense. Phenomenology in the broadest sense includes, according to his definition, also Jacques Derrida and his followers "in the margins," because Derrida refers to Husserl and the phenomenological tradition but would not consider himself to be a phenomenologist. Another example would be Heidegger after the *Kehre*. I am not too happy with Spiegelberg's terminology because the weak difference between *broad* and *broadest* blurs the radical difference between an at least partially positive application of a tradition and thus the sharing of some common denominators and a radical rejection including explicitly or implicitly the verdict "is at its end." Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is not a phenomenology in the broadest sense. But even in case of a phenomenology in the broad sense, large parts of the tradition, in this case of Husserl's phenomenology, can be rejected.

(2) A still external criterion is the style hermeneutics belonging to the level of higher hermeneutics. Radical changes and differences of style and structure of the texts in one tradition are external indicators of essential changes in the method and perspectives. A simple and obvious example is the difference of the style and structure of the third of Descartes's *Meditations* and the *quaestiones* 2–12, *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas of Aquinas. Sometimes the difference of changes of the connotations of terms can be indicators of serious changes—of course without determining the real content and the real significance of such changes. The difference of the style of Husserlian texts and the texts of Merleau-Ponty is obvious, but an analysis of such style differences indicating differences in approach is not necessary if there are explicit remarks about method in the texts.

(3) A very tricky problem of the hermeneutics of style is the use of so-called *topoi* and especially *topoi* used in references to earlier texts of a philosophical tradition. There is a certain *topos* used again and again in the Western philosophical tradition. The *topos* of "understanding a text according to the spirit and not to the letter" was originally coined for the

purposes of biblical hermeneutics in the Patristic tradition.⁴ Since Fichte's interpretation of Kant,⁵ the *topos* and its derivations has been used again and again, especially in the European philosophical tradition. A variant of the *topos* with a less theological halo is Kant's claim that it is possible to understand an author better than he understood himself.⁶ There are other variants of the *topos* and the precise understanding of the specific meaning and the significance of such *topoi* in the context in which they are used is in the most cases very difficult.⁷

There are some variants belonging to the tricky area of split application and rejection that can have the character of hiding the fact that what seems to be an at least partial application is in the end a complete rejection. Whether that is the case or not can only be seen in closer interpretations of the content. One example is Fichte's use of the *topos* in his interpretation of Kant. No doubt, Fichte held Kant in high esteem. He was his spiritual mentor and hero. But his own enterprise implied a complete rejection of basic and decisive results of Kant's philosophy and a complete overthrow of his regressive "hypothetical" constructions of "the conditions of the possibility of experience." Thus Fichte, in order to "save" his master, tells us that his philosophy unearths the hidden presuppositions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* according to its letter and, in addition, claims that these presuppositions belong to the spirit of the *Critique* and that Kant was aware of it.

The sixty-page chronological overview of "Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl" by Professor Ted Toadvine is a highly valuable tool for an attempt to answer the central question of this essay: what happens to the phenomenological method in Merleau-Ponty's writings? The material collected there is sufficient to illustrate my thesis in general and the reasons that can be given for it. This does not imply that I claim that the material covers the ground for possible material comparisons between Merleau-Ponty's and Husserl's phenomenology of perception, intersubjectivity, and other concrete problems, although there may be enough hints for such purposes. I restrict myself to such hints when I must refer to more concrete questions.

4. E. g., Athanasius the Great. The question whether he was the first can be left open.

5. Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

6. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 370, with respect to Plato.

7. Derrida's "deconstruction" of texts is also a most radical variant of the *topos*, implying in addition a breathtaking eschatological background of speculation.

In explicating my thesis, I start with Professor Toadvine's observation that already an interpretation of the preface of the *Phénoménologie de la perception* has:

to gauge the degree to which Merleau-Ponty already separates the letter of Husserl's philosophy from the spirit in which this philosophy is taken up by Merleau-Ponty himself.⁸

This is, of course, a use of the Fichtean version of the *topos*. It is possible to show how Merleau-Ponty himself used more and more radical versions of the *topos*. It is also possible to show that he tried to give an interpretation of the development of Husserl distinguishing three stages. The last stage alleges that Husserl himself hints at the hidden presuppositions of his phenomenology, thereby revealing the true "spirit" of his philosophy that has to be saved. It will be the first task of this paper to discuss this interpretation and to indicate that it is untenable as an interpretation. Nevertheless, the interpretation shows that Merleau-Ponty is in every respect honest in his attempts to "save the face" of his honored master in the light of the new developments introduced by him and others. What I will add are some general observations concerning the historical context of this interpretation in the development of the phenomenological movement in France and Germany before 1960.

My thesis is that *in the course of this development the main motive behind Husserl's phenomenological reduction is abandoned but finally also Husserl's version and his methodological treatment of eidetic intuition*. Using Spiegelberg's formula: phenomenology in the broad sense is completely purged of the problem of the "how of the givenness." What is left is the pure "what is given in originary intuition" and the "what" that remains is, in the final instance, a "what" that is in its essence beyond the reach of the realm in which questions about method are meaningful. It is an "absolute givenness." Questions concerning method, i.e., precisely the questions of the "how of the givenness," are meaningless.

I want to enter several *caveats*: (1) I am far from denying the tremendous value of Merleau-Ponty's research for the understanding of Husserl's published and unpublished writings. He was a great pioneer—if not the greatest in this respect. (2) I am far from denying the value and significance of his phenomenological and, in part, post-phenomenological research, its

8. T. Toadvine, "Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl: A Chronological Overview," appendix to this volume, 237 [cited hereafter as Appendix].

Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl

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