

The Cogito in Nature and History

Phenomenological and Hermeneutical Aspects

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ABSTRACT: The paper sets out to offer a brief overview on the elaboration of phenomenological understanding in its original form within Husserl's program and in later developments (Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty). It is argued that the still overarching idea of *science* leads Husserl's self-understanding of the task of phenomenology. Heidegger's far-reaching criticism of this stance as well as later critical approaches within the tradition of hermeneutical philosophy (Gadamer) are presented as working on the rehabilitation of the *vital substructures* that sustain any scientific endeavor, included that of Husserl's phenomenology. Hermeneutical criticism and its thematization of an *unreflected* "life of spirit" (embodied by the notion of "understanding") calls however for a necessary integration that pays heed to the aspect of the *unreflected* "natural life" operative in our experience of reality. I claim that this latter integration is achieved by Merleau-Ponty's reformulation of the notion of *cogito* and of "intuition" in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

KEYWORDS: phenomenological tradition, hermeneutic philosophy, life-philosophy, *cogito*, operative intuition.

1. Husserl and the Notion of Intuition

Phenomenology can be said to designate a certain "how" of research and knowledge.¹ If this is so, then what is expressly indicated by phenomenology in its methodological self-understanding must also determine the conception of the specific "how" of phenomenological intending.² In this regard, it

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1. MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006 [19th ed.]), pp. 34–35.

2. "Granting that a decisive judgment concerning a philosophical doctrine can be made from the point of view offered by a criticism of method, we are still permitted to take as philosophy's genuine method only what is expressly indicated by this philosophy within the framework of its own methodological self-understanding." Eugen Fink, "Die phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik," in *Studien zur Phänomenologie, 1930–1939*. *Phaenomenologica* 21 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966). Transl. by R. O. Elveton, "The Phenomenological Philosophy

seems that a specific concept of knowledge leads Husserl's determination of the kind of *exhibiting* and *demonstration* defining phenomenology. In *Ideas I*, Husserl begins his introduction into the idea of a pure phenomenology with considerations about "natural knowledge," the knowledge belonging to the sciences as sciences of the real, true being. In Kantian fashion, Husserl writes, "Natural knowledge begins with experience [*Erfahrung*] and remains in experience."³ The epistemological relation to "real being" (*reales Sein*) is further determined by its original source (*Urquell*), by what Husserl names the "giving intuition" (*gebende Anschauung*) of "natural experience" (*natürliche Erfahrung*) which, finally, he eminently identifies with "perception" (*Wahrnehmung*). The extent to which "perception" is thus *philosophically* understood must determine the way in which the task of scientific knowledge is ultimately conceived (especially with regard to the usual rendering of cognitive activity as the relationship between a "subject" and its "object"). In this connection, Heidegger clearly acknowledges Husserl's merit in having reawakened an understanding for the philosophical sense of the "empirical," but more importantly also to have taught the necessary *path* to achieve such understanding.⁴

In spite of Husserl's explicit critical attitude towards the "naturalism" of natural science, i.e., the project of capturing life in terms of the causal relationship between discriminable elementary and fixed components, the still overarching idea of *science* can be said to lead Husserl's philosophical concerns.⁵ Both in its narrower modern sense, mostly identified with natural science, and in its broader original form as ἐπιστήμη, this idea signifies the effort to arrive at a detailed explanation of what is in play in the reality that is met with in experience. In the scientific explanation, however, there is an intrinsic tendency to assume a separate and independent existence of the subject-matter of study with a corresponding disappearance from view of the one doing the investigation. This is in a way a matter of necessity insofar as when we experience *something*, we cannot at the same time *apperceive that by means of which* we experience it. In other words, because it is in the nature of experience in general to be "objectifying," then also scientific experience must be "objectifying." Yet, on the other hand, this leads to a misrecognition

of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism" in *The Phenomenology of Husserl: Selected Critical Readings*, edited by R. O. Elveton, (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 75.

3. Hua III/I, p. 7. Forthwith, all textual references to the volumes of the *Husserliana* (abbreviated as Hua) will indicate the number of the volume and the number of the page of the original German edition.

4. HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 50.

5. One need only to take a look at the consistent return on the meaning of the idea of science in Husserl's work from the essay on *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* (1911) through the designation of the "guiding idea" for a comprehensive work on phenomenology as "Philosophy as Universal science" (see *Ergänzungsband* to the VI. *Cartesianische Meditation*, p. 10) to the *Crisis of European Sciences* (1936).

of one's own perspective as grounded in the soil of an experience of reality that is and remains *in* the world.

The bracketing effect of Husserl's *epoché* with respect to the thesis of being of the reality given in experience is aimed at turning at once the "natural" regard, always directed towards objects, into the "phenomenological" regard as an "Archimedean point of view" beyond the actual "objective" world *in order to* make the world the theme for an autonomous reflection.⁶ This reflection is accomplished through a *phenomenological reduction* consisting in a move of "regression" towards the experiencing subjectivity and its intentional acts. Husserl's common analyses, setting thus with a correlativistic starting point and being carried out following the model of perceptual experience, establish an equation between "being" and "appearance." The latter is taken in its constitutive relation to the intentional subject, i.e., the "appearance" or the "phenomenon" is taken as *object*. The aim of Husserl's canonic analyses appears thus to be that of elucidating the constitution of objects by following the epistemological subject-object schema ultimately oriented after the Cartesian rubric "ego-cogitatio-cogitata."⁷ As a result, Husserl's philosophical project as guided by the idea of science seems to still operate under the framework of the kind of cognition exercised in any science and, for this reason, there arises the impression that such cognition remains naïve with respect to the fundamental way in which it is bound to a world. And all this in spite of the "anti-naturalizing" effect of the *epoché*.

In a work conceived as a comprehensive introduction to phenomenology and bearing the unequivocal title *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl claims that Descartes' *Meditations* draw the *prototype* for the necessary reflections of any beginning philosopher. The reason for this claim, following Husserl, lies in their turn to the subject both in the sense of a return *to* and radical self-questioning of the philosophizing subject, and, most importantly, for their discovery of the subject as the absolutely certain ground for any knowledge and science that claims to be apodictic. Husserl himself presents his phenomenological project as an attempt to renew the radicalness of Descartes' *Meditations*, even though this project is obliged, and precisely by the radical development of Cartesian motives, "to reject nearly all the well-known doctrinal content of the Cartesian philosophy."⁸ In this context, however, one could ask what *doctrinal* elements are in fact still operative

6. It is interesting to note that Eugen Fink in one of his notes in part shares the view that Husserl's phenomenology is a "philosophy of reflection" since through the *epoché* phenomenological reflection purports to withdraw into what Fink calls a "topos hyperouranios," a place beyond the world. Cf. the comments on this note by Ronald Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink. Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology. 1928-1938* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 327.

7. Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink*, p. 431.

8. Hua I, p. 43.

in the attempt to follow the radical Cartesian *motive* of demonstration in evidence as a characteristic feature of Husserl's phenomenology across his writings and as established by Husserl's Principle of Principles in § 24 of *Ideas I*. Following this principle, the phenomenological reflecting and analyzing aims at an intuitive grasp (*Wesensschau*) of "the originally given [. . .] simple experiential world [. . .] as directly and immediately perceived in its present and as having been perceived and recalled to memory with regard to its past."⁹ Phenomenological exhibition in evidence thus works against all conceptual constructions that cannot be demonstrated with recourse to this method of direct demonstration.

The reflective turn to the direct and immediate experience is thus accomplished in terms of a demonstrative exhibiting in evidence of an *object* given in vivid givenness to an actual intuitive intending. If we go back to the beginning statement in *Ideas I* according to which "Natural knowledge begins with experience and remains in experience," then "experience," from its first unreflected onset to the most explicit reflective activity, can be said to begin with and to remain in *intuition*. In § 69 of *Being and Time* Heidegger speaks of Husserl linking all cognition to "intuition." As Fink notes in one folder from 1939, Husserl takes thinking to be "*an intentional modification of intuition, and one that is thus characterized by a certain mediacy and distance from phenomena.*"¹⁰ Knowledge is for Husserl "intuition." This general significance of the notion of "intuition" thus determines "evidence" as basic mode of intentionality in general and may be said to represent Husserl's radical novel reformulation of Descartes' *motive* of the *clara et distincta perceptio*.¹¹ Yet the way Husserl almost invariably presents the "laying open" done by the reduction as the regressive move from the unity of the object into the manifold of functioning syntheses in the published introductions to phenomenology appears to cast "being" as "appearance" fundamentally as the *object*-being for a thematically intending *subject*. This aspect can be counted as a still *doctrinal* element in Husserl's thought. The procedure towards the thematization of the subject of experience in Cartesian fashion namely runs the risk to identify the subject discovered *by reflection* with the subject *of reflection* and the world unfolding in experience with an already "objective" world. Such way of proceeding can be considered responsible, furthermore, for Merleau-Ponty's claim in his *Nature* lectures about a "double postulate" of Husserlian phenomenology: i.e., (1) the postulate according to which the spontaneous thesis of the world in the natural attitude must be bracketed in order to open up and allow the emergence of the field of pure

9. Hua IX, p. 58.

10. BRUZINA, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink*, pp. 399–400.

11. Fink, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism*, p. 83.

transcendental subjectivity and (2) the postulate according to which the thesis of the natural attitude needs to be bracketed not in order to remove it as an obstacle but in order to find a way to access it à l'état naissant, as Merleau-Ponty might put it.¹²

In the *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl develops a yet further, and last, approach to present his phenomenology to the public based on the theme of the life-world as fundament for any scientifically interpreted construal of reality. The enthusiastic interest in Husserl's notion of the life-world seems to have been fostered by the fact that this idea appears to represent for him a decisive rejection of a Cartesian conception of human being in order to finally bring to a firm thematic focus its underlying structural frame of experience, thereby surpassing the "objectivistic" or "naturalistic" approaches embodied in the modern scientific concept of nature. A more substantial analysis of the exceptional achievements of the *Crisis* cannot be offered in the present context. However there are some important clues in the *Crisis*-texts that would allow us to put the notion of the life-world in a first sketchy perspective sufficing for our present purposes.

For example, if the notion of "horizon" takes on a consolidated role in Husserl's analyses as inseparable from any object-focused intentionality starting as early as *Ideas I*, Husserl's tendency is to treat this notion in the sense of a "potentiality" for consciousness, that is, as something with a derivative meaning with respect to the constitutive function of actual object-structuration in the present. Still in the *Crisis*, in spite of the deepening of insight into the "understanding that rules in concealment, i.e., that rules as constituting the always already developed. . . intuitively given surrounding world," (§ 28),¹³ Husserl reaffirms the ego-centered epistemological schema of subject-object as *canonic* for phenomenology (see for example §§ 50, 52, 53). In other words, Husserl's approach to the life-world still operates in terms of the entry-level function of the constitution of objects (see §§ 47–49). This approach draws from the conception of "inner perception" after the model of the "Cartesian ego cogito" (see § 30), i.e., from the delimitation of intuitive *evidencing* as ultimate methodological feature for the grasping of phenomenological findings but also ultimately for the transcendental operations in phenomenology's investigations. Yet such delimitation that follows the paradigm of object-perception parallels in Husserl at the same time the tendency to determine the character of being from the status being has in being *known*, that in Husserl is mainly embodied by a certain

12. MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, *La nature; Notes, Cours du Collège de France*, edited by Dominique Ségald (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995), p. 103ff.

13. Quoted by Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink*, p. 430.

declination of the doctrine of the “eidetic method” in the at least apparent direction of an epistemological idealism. In other words, Husserl tends to bring the phenomenological (knowing) stance of analysis into the way in which “being-as-appearance” itself is to be understood. Yet the “subject” discovered by phenomenological analysis as the subject of the life-world is *not* to be identified at once with the “pure spectator” of *phenomenological procedure*. Then the “disinterested spectator” doing the phenomenologizing is to *disclose* the transcendental grounds of the “empirical subject,” rather than *be* those grounds ipso facto as phenomenologically operating.¹⁴ Husserl’s tendency, however, is that of reaching to the “transcendental” form of the life-world — i.e., the constitution of the basic temporal and spatial horizons of being-as-intending and being-as-appearing — via regressive analysis within egoic self-reflection, thereby also taking the operation of primordial constitution as itself egoic in form.¹⁵

2. Husserl, Life-Philosophy and Hermeneutics

A decisive criticism that intended to break with the phenomenological conception of a consciousness accomplishing the fundamental operation of meaning-bestowal (*Sinngebung*) and more generally with the modern epistemological subject-object schema that sustains it finds one of its principal directions of development in a “meditation about history,” especially in dialogue with Dilthey and the philosophy of life.¹⁶ Heidegger’s *pathos*-laden raising of the question of being of man and his elaboration of the concept of understanding as the original characteristic of the being of human life itself is an eminent and far-reaching example of such meditation. Gaining an insight into the facticity of this understanding, that is, into its uncircumventable historical mode of being, is to be considered a pivotal step in order to advance phenomenology beyond both the ontological obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity, on the one hand, and the conception of a “harmless subject” (Heidegger’s critique), on the other.

The conceptual articulation of Heidegger’s placing of philosophical reflection within a system of principles that articulate the dynamics of finitude required the implementation of an adapted version of the phenomenologi-

14. Ibid., p. 498.

15. Ibid., p. 513.

16. See for example Martin Heidegger, *Ein Rückblick auf den Weg*, in Martin Heidegger, *Besinnung, Gesamtausgabe* 66, edited by F.-W. von Hermann (Klostermann: Frankfurt am Main, 1998), pp. 411–417. For an account of the dispute between phenomenological and life-philosophical approaches to the concept of “life,” see Bruzina, *Eugen Fink and Edmund Husserl*, ch. 6, in particular pp. 316–341.

cal method in contradistinction to the directly intuitive Husserlian kind.¹⁷ In § 1 of *Being and Time* Heidegger makes clear very soon the need on phenomenological ground to move behind the schema with which Husserl regularly begins his analyses, namely, the *epistemological subject-object* schema. Not such schema, but rather *Dasein's* "hermeneutical situation" must for Heidegger be the starting point of the analysis of the meaning of being. For Heidegger the talk of the "subject" in terms of a "phenomenological residuum" of the "neutralization" of the world, of a "universe of pure subjectivity,"¹⁸ of "subjective apperception in pure sense"¹⁹ would represent a relapse into the mundane "objectifying" situation of the natural attitude because the way this subject is conceived follows the "intra-worldly" model of the wakeful reflective subject. Even if Heidegger certainly shares with Husserl the idea that the "world" cannot be clarified by means of a regress to an intrawordly being (the transcendental I is *not* "of this world" Husserl writes), he holds against Husserl the claim that *Dasein* as "transcendental subject" is and remains a being *in the world* that is however nothing like any other wordly, entitative being.²⁰ Instead therefore of the determination of the "essence" of something in terms of a structural entitative property intuitively grasped at the end of a process of evidencing in descriptive analysis, Heidegger's method of disclosure of the "essence" of the particular kind of being that must function as the onsetting theme of study of the question of being is framed after the *non-entitative* character of *Dasein's being*. In order to respect the special character of the theme of inquiry, Heidegger stresses that the features that must represent the initial determinations of *Dasein's* "essence" can only be indicated "formally," that is, as not implying any definitive, and entitative, content-filling determination. Thus Heidegger's choice of wording the structural particularities of *Dasein's* being "existentials," thereby stressing the peculiar nature of the theme under investigation as *not* being able to be articulated in terms of the classic modes of definition according to *genus* and *species* and thus in terms of the possible "categorization" of any entitative being.

Such radical appropriation of the phenomenological method with respect to the special "situation" of *Dasein* — Heidegger's "hermeneutic" phenomenology — has been taken as being quite in contrast with Husserl's method of intuitive evidencing. Later hermeneutical criticism drew inspiration from Heidegger's rethinking of the thematic of "life" and "history" as elaborated by Dilthey's work. Indeed a *life-philosophical* background of

17. See especially the methodological discussions in *Being and Time*, §§ 2, 7, 32, 45, 61, 63.

18. Hua IX, p. 249.

19. Hua IX, pp. 274–275.

20. Hua IX, p. 601.

hermeneutics is indisputable. Contemporary hermeneutics as well as the philosophies of life of the beginning of the 20th century both endeavored to highlight the unarticulated fore-structures of thinking and understanding in order to account for the totality of the aspects of concrete human life with special focus on the non-rational side with its experiential, libidinal, and instinctive moments.²¹

Dilthey's conception of the historical world in terms of a *Wirkungszusammenhang* is inspired by a reflection on the nature of *Erlebnis* as lived nexus of efficacy that cannot in principle be "dismembered" in analytical elements such as the "objective units" of the sciences and neither being accounted for by means of the natural scientific concept of causality. On the level of historical realities, moreover, Dilthey does not see the unity of what we could call now "spirit" being fulfilled in the absolute knowledge of philosophy, as it is for Hegel. This is due to the fact that all psychological life, both on the individual and the universal level, is always subject to the force of circumstances. Life is always limited by the course of its effect (*Wirkungsverlauf*). This limitation, however, is not an obstacle, but is constitutive for the peculiar fusion into the unity of coherence that characterizes any form of life.²²

In spite of the affinity between Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* and Dilthey's notion of *Wirkungszusammenhang*, Gadamer points out in *Truth and Method* an "inner conflict" in Dilthey's analysis of historical consciousness between science and life-philosophy.²³ Such conflict supposedly stems from what Gadamer refers to as Dilthey's "unresolved Cartesianism." Dilthey's Cartesianism is linked by Gadamer to the scientific ideal of certainty that underlied his epistemological project and that led him to unquestionably assume the concept of natural scientific objectivity as the paradigm of all knowledge.²⁴ In other words, Dilthey's epistemological approach was still characterized by the tendency to assume the nexus of efficacy operating in living experience to be studied as an independent and separate structure.²⁵ This structure, in Gadamer's words, is established as "the result of a critical method [of reflection and doubt] that admits only

21. BRUZINA, *Eugen Fink and Edmund Husserl*, p. 331. See also Jan-Ivar Lindén, "Wirkungsmächtige Tradition. Hermeneutische und lebensphilosophische Aspekte," in *Studia Phaenomenologica* XI (2011): 128ff.

22. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *Gesammelte Werke Band 1* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), pp. 226 and 229. Henceforth, I will abbreviate all references to Gadamer's *Gesammelte Werke* as GW, followed by the number of the volume and the page number of the original German edition. The quotations in English follow the translation by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (*Truth and Method*, London / New York: Continuum, 2014).

23. GW 1, pp. 235–246 (*Part Two, I. 2. b.*)

24. GW 1, p. 241ff.

25. LINDÉN, *Wirkungsmächtige Tradition*, p. 130.

the validity of what cannot be doubted.”²⁶ Therefore, as it follows from the present critique, Dilthey seems to give in to the scientific ideal of objective knowledge and its nominalistic tendency.

Gadamer extends his critique to Husserl’s conception of *Erlebnis* as a conception that also fails to free itself entirely from the modern idea of a pure consciousness apperceiving its experience under an idea. According to Gadamer, Husserl’s failure to think radically the genuine “living” aspect of life — the unreflected and pre-reflective — emerges especially in connection with the problem of intersubjectivity. Gadamer writes, “The immanent data of reflectively examined consciousness do not include the ‘Thou’ in an immediate and primary way.”²⁷ It is in this context that Gadamer is able to point to the essential role of prejudice that is inevitably involved in all understanding.²⁸ As the expression “pre-judice” (*Vor-Urteil*) shows, prejudices are characterized by a judgment structure. As such, prejudices seem to bear an essential relation to speech, which Gadamer also links to the history of the meaning of the word *Verstehen* from the legal domain, in which “understanding” means “to stand up for.”²⁹ As Gadamer remarks, this meaning “takes on its true force as directed against another person, making it possible to ‘answer’ and compel him to come *with* one to ‘judgment’: these are the elements of ‘conflict’,” Gadamer continues, “which authentic dialogue includes.”³⁰ The logic of prejudice underlying all understanding is a logic of dialogue, of question and answer, on the model of which Gadamer finally defines the understanding involved in the hermeneutical task of interpreting texts. On the dialogical model, hermeneutic experience is understood as the experience of the Thou (*Du*) and thus as a moral phenomenon, since “the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us.”³¹ In Part Three of *Truth and Method* Gadamer will emphasize the “operative” moments included in the dialogical relationship against Hegel’s “dialectic” under the guidance of the phenomenon of language.

Following Heidegger’s pivotal impulse, Gadamer thus works a notion of “life” of consciousness in terms of a kind of “understanding” in play in any dealing with things as thus being fundamentally disclosive beyond, or beneath, the explicit disclosure provided by “theoretical” understanding. Therefore, in Gadamer’s thought, the general notion of “life” whose analysis aims at making available the unreflected fore-structures of understanding,

26. GW I, p. 243.

27. GW I, p. 253.

28. GW I, p. 274.

29. GW I, p. 265 n. 173.

30. *Ibid*

31. GW I, p. 364.

thanks to its essential dialogical character and its relationship with *logos* and language, acquires more the sense of what may be designated as “life of spirit” than being anything close to the dynamics of natural or biological life. And yet not only approaches can be found in connection with Dilthey’s notion of *Erlebnis* that go in the direction of a rehabilitation of the *natural* incarnation of consciousness,³² *pace* Gadamer’s *Erlebnis*–critique in *Truth and Method*, but the phenomenological tradition also contributed decisively to such rehabilitation as it can be shown in connection with Maurice Merleau–Ponty’s philosophy of nature. In the final part of the present essay I will show how Merleau–Ponty’s advances in *concretizing* the subject of experience delimited by phenomenological analysis follow the inherent transcendental striving of Husserl’s phenomenology with and beyond its *doctrinal* “Cartesian” moments. Husserl’s rediscovery of the “empirical” and the *way* to make explicit what is in play in it shall constitute the framework where the phenomenological “intuition” and the hermeneutic focus on “understanding” can and must remain in dialogue. The following remarks will show therefore that Heidegger’s radical appropriation of the phenomenological method is not so much in contrast to Husserl’s method of intuitional evidencing as it represents a further radicalization of phenomenology’s methodological self–understanding. As a consequence, hermeneutical criticism and its thematization of a “life of spirit” in terms of “understanding” is not opposed but it should be rather considered to fulfill an integrative task with respect to the description of the fundamental “intuition” as opening to a reality on the part of a *natural living* “consciousness.”

3. The Cogito in Nature: Merleau–Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception

In the following I will limit myself to singling out some lines of focus in Merleau–Ponty’s phenomenological inquiry into the natural aspect of living consciousness in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In this inquiry some of the grounding conceptions of the Western philosophic tradition undergo radical recasting and integration beyond, for example, the deeply embedded Cartesian dichotomy, in order to gain an understanding regarding the *birth* of meaning and meaning’s all–embracing role in human “being–in–the–world.” It is the claim to be demonstrated in what follows that Merleau–Ponty’s elaborating of particulars in the context of an integratively non–dichotomous transcendental phenomenological project achieves

32. See Jan–Ivar Lindén’s contribution, “Wirkungsmächtige Tradition. Hermeneutische und lebensphilosophische Aspekte” in *Studia Phaenomenologica* XI (2011).

thereby an ontological grounding of experience already in *Phenomenology of Perception* through the finding of an “ontological world” and “ontological body” in the heart of the “subject” (467).³³ In this manner Merleau–Ponty’s resituates dualities in a single dynamic ontological thrust, so that phenomenology becomes no less a philosophy of living *nature* as a philosophy of living *spirit*.³⁴

Merleau–Ponty’s analysis of the “body proper” (*le corps propre*) and of its correlative, the “perceived world” (*le monde perçu*), articulates a conception of “knowledge” in general as fundamental bodily opening to reality — Merleau–Ponty speaks repeatedly in the *Phenomenology of Perception* of an “understanding” (*comprendre*) of the body³⁵ — but also a conception of *scientific* or *philosophical* knowledge, knowledge in the proper sense, where “spirit wants to possess the true, define itself the objects and access therefore a knowledge that is universal and independent from our situation.”³⁶ This latter conception of knowledge emerges as a transcendental theory of the eidetic that is however explicitly appropriated by Merleau–Ponty as, in his words, the “resolution to make the world appear such as it is before any return to ourselves, it is the ambition to match reflection with the non–reflective life of consciousness (X–XI).” Merleau–Ponty’s conception of phenomenology as a reflection on an unreflected shows clearly that his analysis of intentionality has a firm grasp on the fact that the “sense” that is understood conceptually has a *living* connection with an antecedent or more fundamental “sense” as having experiential origin. This means also however that Merleau–Ponty is fully aware that beyond or beneath one’s own phenomenologizing the source of all that which has to have a meaning for us is one’s own *living*. The implication of such conception of the “eidetic reduction” is that the kind of philosophical understanding reached by means of it needs itself to undergo a further “reduction” within the system of “eidetic” findings.

The recovery of the living element of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) in *Phenomenology of Perception* can certainly be said to find a decisive radicalization in the first lecture–course at the Collège de France (*Le monde sensible et*

33. MAURICE MERLEAU–PONTY, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). All textual references to this work will be found in the text put in brackets. For the quotations in English I partly follow the translation by Richard Rojcewicz, yet unpublished.

34. See Rudolf Bernet, “The Subject in Nature,” in *Merleau–Ponty in Contemporary Perspective. Phaenomenologica 129* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), p. 55.

35. MERLEAU–PONTY, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, pp. 167, 169 (with respect to body’s movement), p. 183 (with respect to body’s sexuality), pp. 272, 274 (with respect to the sensing body), p. 461 (with respect to body’s expressivity).

36. Excerpt from “Un inédit de M. Merleau–Ponty” (*Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, No 4, 1962, p. 405) quoted by Reneaud Barbaras in his contribution on “Merleau–Ponty et la nature” (*Research in Phenomenology* 31 (1), 2001: 22–38). My translation.

le monde de l'expression) through the courses on *Nature* to the unfinished project of *The Visible and the Invisible*. It is however in the light of the phenomenological analyses of Merleau-Ponty's second important work that the further formulations and notions receive their full grounding evidence and pregnancy.³⁷ So for instance the use of the notion of *Gestalt* from physiology and psychology allows Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* to articulate the material sense integrativeness that is characteristic of the behavior of animal and human *nature* in the natural world as anticipating the notion of "flesh" as the universal intercorporeity of living bodies and non-living things.³⁸

If with the reduction phenomenology attempts to tackle the "senseful" and coherent unity of experience by a regression to the manifold that pervades it, then the issue of the way a unity originates out of multiplicity is clearly the issue of the coming about of an *integration*. The study of the "body schema," for example, does not lead to the conception of bodily consciousness as a snapshot of oneself to oneself, but rather it sheds light on an ongoing integrative process that is key in the determination of the relations between "consciousness" and "nature," "The notion of the body schema," Merleau-Ponty writes, "leads not only to a new description of the unity of the body but thereby also leads to a redetermination of the unity of the senses and the unity of the object (271)." Such integration is something that *gets done*, that is *underway*, it is a "recreation" or "reconstitution" of the world at each and every moment (240). Correspondingly, "sensing" is not the possession of a *quale* but it is to be reinterpreted as a "feeling" of a modality of existence (270). Every "perceptual act," every "sensation" is made explicit only out of a "global attachment" to the world (279), that is, out of the active engagement in the world of an incarnate human body. The subject of perception is a "power" that is co-given with a certain milieu of "existence" (245). On the other hand, the reality that is thus perceived is not a "natural geometry," but rather a "framework of relations" (346) — what is thematized in *Phenomenology of Perception* as the *phenomenal field* —, "a living connection that can be compared or that is rather identical to that between the parts of my body (237)." The unity of the "sensing" and the "sensible" is thus not instantaneous but it is rather a "process," it is both "retaining" (habit) and "projective" (virtual movements), the body anticipates the movements that it needs to do in order to perform a certain task within the constraints of a certain constellation of things. This "phenomenological reduction," already introduced in *The Structure of Behavior* through the way of the psychology of *Gestalt*, changes completely the de-

37. BERNET, "The Subject in Nature," p. 55.

38. BERNET, "The Subject in Nature," p. 66.

termination of sensing in terms of a punctual and instantaneous event as a result of an excitation. As Merleau-Ponty points out in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is the notion of “immediacy” itself that gets transformed (70). Not the “impression” nor the “object,” but rather the “sense,” the “structure,” the “spontaneous arrangement of the parts,” the “spatial and qualitative values” are immediate (70, 72). Thus against the theory of intuition understood as sudden coincidence between a “subject” facing an independent “object” by which their difference is erased, Merleau-Ponty develops already in his earlier work the idea of a perceptual experience that rejoins its object by “plunging” into the “thickness” (*épaisseur*) of the world (236) and through the “depth” (*épaisseur*) of an “original acquisition” (250). These formulations clearly anticipate what Merleau-Ponty says about “intuition” as “auscultation and palpation in depth (*épaisseur*)” in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

What could be described as a *re-sensualization* of Heidegger’s existential analysis as the only way we *can* exist leads in Merleau-Ponty at the same time to a reevaluation of Cartesian ontology (a quite transformed one indeed) that goes together with a “rescuing” of the Husserlian perspective.³⁹ What I would like to show in the conclusive part of this essay are some important details about this “natural behavior” beyond the *descriptive* analyses of the first two parts of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, that is, at the turning point where Merleau-Ponty moves from a *descriptive* phenomenology into a *phenomenology of phenomenology* (419) and the “cogito” that has been carrying out the phenomenological descriptions is itself “reduced” and reabsorbed within the framework of the findings about “natural behavior.”

4. The Cogito in Nature: The Notion of “Operative Intuition”

The concrete analyses of the first two chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception* describe a form of “originary intentionality” that is that of the “movement of the body” as a mode of behavior towards the “object” that is different than “cognition” (444). This can be clearly seen by paying heed to some formulations. In the context of the analysis of “sensing” Merleau-Ponty describes the latter as a “thought” subjected to a “field” (251). In the rest of the work, Merleau-Ponty develops a detailed analysis of what he calls the “pre-conscious possession of the world on the part of the pre-reflexive cogito” (344). In other words, it is a question for Merleau-Ponty of addressing the naturalness of the validity of the world, its “certainty,” in its being given within an ongoing living experience. It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty’s

39. RENATO CRISTIN (ed.), *Fenomenologia* (Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, 1999), p. 88.

subscribing to the radical meaning of the Cartesian “reduction to the subject” (423) at the beginning of the third chapter of the *Phenomenology of Perception* parallels that of Husserl at the beginning of the *Méditations Cartésiennes*. This radical meaning consists in the discovery of the absolute “solipsism” of the subject (412–413), i.e., that *there is* an experience of the world only as experience *for me*, that all possible appearance of “sense” can only be appearance-to-me and “make sense” for me. Yet, having already reduced the subject as thus universal milieu of experience to my *living body* as insurmountable instance of experience, the understanding of this universal *cogito* will not be identical with an abstract “unity” beyond and behind the representations of things and ideas (427). On the contrary, the *cogitatio* of this *cogito* has an original “contact” with itself and with the world (432) and it is given over to events and time (429). The “unity” or “synthesis” of experience operated by the *cogito* thus is not that of a subject facing an object. It is not an intellectual synthesis, but a *lived* synthesis that gets done only as the *cogito* is situated *in* it already and does not start it in any way. It is in fact a “perceptual synthesis” (432) and the *cogito* a perceiving *cogito*. As a result, the meditation on the *cogito* is at the same time a meditation on its *In- Sein*, as any experience I have reveals the world as already encompassing me and as something inherently independent *from me* or as radically transcending *my* experience,

I encompass (*comprends*) the world because it is for me that there are the near and the far, foregrounds and horizons, and because it is thereby before me that the world forms a tableau and takes on meaning; which is to say, ultimately, that the world does so because I am situated in it, i.e., because it encompasses (*comprend*) me. (467)

The *cogito* as center of experience is characterized by a fundamental freedom as “the fundamental power by which I step back and explicitly become the subject of all my experiences (413),” power that never allows to identify the “subject” with anything that *is* (438). This position however cannot be interpreted in the sense of a conception of the world as “phenomenon” for a consciousness that would exclude all “being” but it only returns the unattainability of our own being. This unattainability however does not imply the severing of myself from all that *is*: *there is* this “act” or “doing” of mine (438) as opening and access to a “real,” a fundamental kind of “living” (*leben*) as primordial operation starting from which it becomes possible to have “lived experience” (*erleben*) of this or that world (186).

The truth of Cartesianism is to lead us radically and inexorably to this “evidence” of all evidence, to a most fundamental “evidence” of all experience and awareness and basis for any further reflexive “evidencing.” This fundamental “living” — the “transcendental event” (466) — is described

by Merleau–Ponty as the “living” of an “intuitive thought” with respect to which any formalization is always retrospective and wherein all “certainty” and “truth” are primordially grounded (441–442). As a result, Merleau–Ponty accomplishes at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception* the task of making explicit on the level of “knowledge” proper — be it the knowledge achieved by mathematics or that coming about by means of linguistic expression and cultural productions — in terms no longer of a “view from nowhere” but rather as a “view of the world . . . in concrete form” (445), i.e., in the form of the *natural incarnation of the experiencing “subject.”*

The view of the *cogito* is thus no longer that of Descartes’ *intuitus mentis* but that of what I would like to describe here as an *operative intuition*. Being “operative” means to function unthematically and this is precisely the mode of functioning of the *natural* attitude. In this tone Merleau–Ponty insists that “It is in no way the case that geometrical thought completely transcends perceptual consciousness; on the contrary, it is from the perceived world that I borrow the very notion of essence.” (444) and further, “If the perceived thing had not founded in us, once and for all, the ideal of a being that remains what it is [*l’idéal de l’être qui est ce qu’il est*], there would be no phenomenon of stable being, and mathematical thought would appear to us as a sheer creation. What we call the essence of the triangle is nothing other than this presumption of a completed synthesis, and such a presumption is exactly our definition of a thing (445).” Therefore, even if in reflection my “I” undergoes such a transformation that at the moment in which the most radical consequences of reflection are drawn this “I” appears as being no longer a human “I,”⁴⁰ still *this* individual human subject remains under the meditating *ego* like the weariness of the actor persists in the performance of her character. The “original thoughts” (75) of my *operative* “intuitive thought” are the onset for an irreducible “resistance of passivity (75).” The structure of being contributing to my current perception or to my present conviction is the irreducible starting point *from which* the “ideal,” the “eternal,” or the “transcendental subject” are *later* affirmed (75). Thereby reflection is a “transformation,” a “change” of the structure of our *natural existence* and this *fact* can never be circumnavigated.

In other words, any grasp of the “ideal” or “eternal” requires for its realization some form of *living expression* in which an “implicit pre-knowledge of essences”⁴¹ is already operative. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* the

40. This is Husserl’s own formulation from Hua IX.

41. MARC RICHIR, “Merleau–Ponty and the Question of Phenomenological Architectonics,” in *Merleau–Ponty in Contemporary Perspective. Phaenomenologica 129* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), p. 40.

theory of truth is thus established upon a theory of expression.⁴² The logic of expression, that has the task of defining the notion of “concrete” or “material” essence,⁴³ is founded upon an ultimate logic of *integration* in the analysis of temporality as the last methodological step of the genetic phenomenology that Merleau–Ponty develops in the Third Chapter of his work. The fundamental temporal structure of living experience reveals both what makes possible but also ultimately unstable any intuition of essence in reflection.

The Cartesian *motive* of description in evidence leads to the discovery of a fundamental “evidence” whose meaning obliges us to rethink the procedure of reflective evidencing and the “evident” nature of its findings (“essences”). It is only the reaching to the most fundamental finding of all, that of *time*, that must transform the significance and scope of the already exercised feature of “evidencing.” Only then, one can argue, the rejoining of reflection and the non–reflective will be accomplished and only then the notion of “essence” (*Wesen*) will complete the transition from a *formal* to a genuine *material* essence. The extent of this program that can here only be mentioned in passing seems to have been already underway in Husserl’s summarizing statement of his studies from the 20’s (*Formale und transzendente Logik*) as well as the later sets of manuscripts on time (*C–Manuskripte*).⁴⁴ Merleau–Ponty’s inestimable contribution to phenomenology in *Phenomenology of Perception* might be said to consist in having made explicit the way of such program by establishing the *ontological priority* of the *Lebenswelt* and by showing that this move does not allow to take the necessity of a recourse to essences as a self–contained fact but shall have consequences, requiring a more precise assessment, upon the sense of *epistemological priority*.⁴⁵

If phenomenology discovers the “true concrete” or ultimate concretum, in order to give it the proper conceptual articulation, it itself still requires a critique of traditionally given schemata within its analysis such as the schema of subject–object epistemological correlation, the schema of act–intentionality in constitution, the schema of egoity in the analysis of

42. MERLEAU–PONTY, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, pp. 445–452. See for instance the closing statement of this important paragraph, “Indeed we have no experience of an eternal truth or of a participation in the One; instead, we experience concrete acts of appropriation by which, in the midst of the hazards of time, we forge relations with ourselves and with others. In brief, we experience a *participation in the world*: ‘being–in–the–truth’ is not distinct from being–in–the–world.” (452)

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 147, 442.

44. See in particular chs. 6–7 in *Formale und transzendente Logik* and the three Appendices. See also Ronald Bruzina, “Husserl’s ‘Naturalism’ and Genetic Phenomenology,” in *New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* 10, 2010, pp. 91–125.

45. See *ibid.* 430 n.1. Frank Robert stresses a point along the same lines in “Fondement et fondation,” in *Chiasmi International* (2), 2000, *From Nature to Ontology*, p. 369, n. 14.

the living temporal present, and the schema of personal identity for transcendental subjectivity.⁴⁶ Heidegger's transcendental project in *Being and Time* whose aim is to establish *temporality* as the ground of all understanding of being and the further hermeneutic advance in the direction of a meditation on the universal life of *language* (Gadamer) attest a clear awareness of the necessity to critically address the pivotal role of the subject's irreducible priority in accessibility within *preliminary* phenomenology, but at the same time also to decisively radicalize life-philosophical approaches to the pre-reflective aspects of life. On his part, Merleau-Ponty follows the inherent transcendental and methodological striving of Husserl's phenomenology in order to show the possibility on phenomenological grounds to elaborate a "facticity of the *Wesen*" (Richir) with reference to the *natural finitude* of human life no less than to its *historical finitude*.

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46. See Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink*, pp. 331 and 370.

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