

Annotations to the "Preface"  
from Maurice Merleau-Ponty  
***The Phenomenology of Perception***  
(London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962)

**Paragraphs 1 and 2**

In the first two paragraphs Merleau-Ponty raises the question of the meaning of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty ostensibly departs from a study of Husserl's work which he had been reading in its unpublished manuscript form (later published as *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*).

In his introductory lines Merleau-Ponty implies that Husserl had not provided a conclusive response to the question of the meaning of phenomenology. So Merleau-Ponty sets out to do a strong reading of Husserl's notion of phenomenology by attempting to resolve inherent contradictions in Husserl's phenomenology and by strengthening the purpose and orientation of Husserl's account as Merleau-Ponty understood it.

The text in italics are quotes from the paragraphs as indicated. They represent selections that are programmatic, insightful, vivid and often poetic formulations frequently quoted and cited in the phenomenological literature. My annotations are entered beneath these selected passages.

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*(1)...What is phenomenology? It may seem strange that this question has still to be asked half a century after the first works of Husserl. The fact remains that it has by no means been answered. Phenomenology is the study of essences...the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example.*

The question, "what is phenomenology?" is really an enduring question that belongs to the self-reflective nature of phenomenology. Husserl defined phenomenology as the study of essences. For some philosophers this may still be a valid characterization, but its meaning can be interpreted in complex and even contradictory ways.

*(2)...But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'.*

Husserl's phenomenology is oriented to transcendental essences and apodictic (indubitable) knowledge. But, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is existential, oriented to lived experience, the concrete human being in the concrete world. The ultimate purpose of phenomenological analysis is not epistemological—the intuition of essences; rather the project of phenomenology is "*concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world.*"

*(3)...It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins--as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world...*

The "natural attitude" refers to the every-day taken-for-grantedness by way of which we experience and consider the things of everyday life. But it also refers to the simple and yet enigmatic origin and significance of the prereflective nature and "wild being" of our moment-to-moment existence.

With Husserl the term "transcendental" refers to the attempt to arrive at the roots of the structures of knowledge of the lifeworld. In the transcendental reduction (after the phenomenological reduction and the eidetic reduction) the lifeworld is loosened from the experiencing subject and connected to a transcendental ego, a pure consciousness. With Merleau-Ponty the reflection of the transcendental reduction is not alienated from the lived meaning of the lifeworld, and rather reconnects with the lifeworld and the encounter of the other.

However, we need to see that when Merleau-Ponty speaks of "a direct and primitive contact with the world," he has opened up a profoundly difficult and even mysterious formulation of terms. How could we possibly make direct contact with the world? Would this contact be through language? If so, what kind of language? Or does Merleau-Ponty refer to a kind of contact that is corporeal, sensuous, imaginal? In what way would this contact be primitive? Or is it rather that we need to be sensitive to how things are given to us directly and how the world makes a primitive contact with us? In his later work Merleau-Ponty takes various perspectives on these questions and his phenomenological reflection become increasingly ontological and poetic..

*(4)...It...shall be a 'rigorous science', but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking into account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide.*

Husserl published in *Logos* an article entitled "Philosophy as rigorous Science" (1910-11). He made clear herein that his aim was to establish a science of foundations, beginnings. Human science needs to get beyond assumptions toward the ultimate starting point or origins. Only by orienting ourselves to what appears to us immediately may we hope to achieve a rigorous inquiry.

*(5)...phenomenology can be practised and identified as a manner or style of thinking... We shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology.[...] Phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method.*

Phenomenological method is more like an attitude, an approach to things, or a way of standing in life than a set of technical research skills. So we need to be wary of those who talk about phenomenology without doing it. What makes the Preface such an inspiring document is that Merleau-Ponty reflects phenomenologically on phenomenology.

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### Paragraphs 3 to 5

*The next section (paragraphs 3-5) addresses the relation between phenomenology and natural science. Merleau-Ponty discusses the idea of the lifeworld as the correlate of that*

*form of consciousness that precedes reflection, i.e., pre-reflective consciousness.*

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*(6)...It is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing. [...] All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second order expression.*

"Descriptive psychology" was developed by Husserl's teacher Franz Brentano. It became a fertile ground for phenomenology, i.e., descriptive phenomenological method. In Brentano's descriptive psychology one does not inquire into the causal origin and causal structure of phenomena rather one concentrates on an exact and detailed describing. Thus the well-known Husserlian expression zu den Sachen selbst to the things themselves. By "things," however, Husserl does not mean empirical facts of science (Tatsachen). The great illusion of science is, according to Husserl, that in its superstitious one-sided admiration of facts science thinks that it can understand and explain the great mysteries of the world and life.

*(7)...To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the country-side in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.*

Merleau-Ponty's notion of "to return to the things themselves" is quite different from Husserl's formulation. For Husserl describing the things themselves means achieving an intuitive grasp of essences. Husserl attempted to go beyond the vantage point of realism (reality is external to the existing human being) and idealism (reality is equivalent to our thinking about the world). Merleau-Ponty's notion of "the return" is to the lived experience of the lifeworld--the world that precedes all reflection, science, or philosophy.

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### **Paragraphs 6 and 7**

*In the next section (paragraph 6,7) Merleau-Ponty sets out to show that the phenomenological reduction is not the expression of a transcendental idealism which loses sight of the concrete particularity of the unique human being and which renders the world utterly transparent at the hand of pure reason and thus washes out the contours of concreteness of the lived world. Rather, true phenomenological reduction aims at bringing into unconcealment the secrecy of our original being: the lived, concrete world.*

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*(8)...The best formulation of the reduction is probably that given by Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant, when he spoke of 'wonder' in the face of the world.*

Out of wonder (silence) questions (words) are born. Wonder eventually leads to question of meaning and meaningfulness, not problem (solving) questions.

*(9)...Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards a unity of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks*

*from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice...*

The "constituting" act of consciousness should not be confused or interpreted as a kind of constructing or constructivism. The nature of the constitution is that it signifies, gives meaning or sense. Thus consciousness does not construct meaning or sense out of nothing, it does not create objects which lie outside of consciousness. In constituting the world, thinking does not produce the world but it lets the world meaningfully appear for us. To constitute is to find/discover/invent meaning to the things that are given to us in our prereflective experience. And yet lived experience can never be captured in its original form. All we ever achieve is reflective and resonating felt-understandings of lived experience. The very notion of lived experience is quite challenging and the topic of many difficult philosophical texts.

*(10)...The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.*

We can never exhaust the possibilities of the world's meanings. Moreover, every description/interpretation is iconic and thus as incomplete as a copy is from its original.

*(11)...[The phenomenologist] ...is a perpetual beginner, which means that he takes for granted nothing that men, learned or otherwise, believe they know.*

Every expression of meaning is marked by suppositions. We must constantly question these beginning suppositions. But to be a perpetual beginner also means that we must constantly orient to our experience as lived and to the originary beginning of these pre-reflective experiences.

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### **Paragraphs 8 and 9**

*In paragraphs 8 and 9, Merleau-Ponty focuses more pointedly on the notion of essence and the meaning of eidetic reduction. Merleau-Ponty places his own insights underneath those of Husserl and thus placing a different emphasis on the nature and purpose of eidetic reduction. Notice how, through powerful poetic images Merleau-Ponty tries to evoke our understanding of the dynamism of these moments. Essences are not things but linguistic prompts that evoke our awareness of the things of the world as we live them.*

*(12)...Husserl's essences are destined to bring back all the living relationships of experience, as the fisherman's net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed. Jean Wahl is therefore wrong in saying that 'Husserl separates essences from existence'. The separated essences are those of language. It is the office of language to cause essences to exist in a state of separation which is in fact merely apparent, since through language they still rest upon the ante-predicative life of consciousness. In the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape.*

Merleau-Ponty argues that our experience (which is in the world and of the world) has the character of having faith or belief in the world and in the way that we have knowledge of the world. According to Merleau-Ponty to perceive the world is to believe in

the world. This belief or faith in the world precedes all reflexive engagement, all reflection on our experience. It is the recognition that human beings are from the beginning tied to the world, that to be able to think about the things of the world we must already be in the world and of the world in the first place. This means also that the world of our lifeworld is not the objective world posited by science.

The French expression "etre au monde" should be understood fully as with-in the world. We are not just in the world but both "in" the world and "of" the world.

*(13)...The eidetic reduction [...] is the ambition to make reflection emulate the unreflective life of consciousness. [...] The world is not what I think, but what I live through.*

Reduction is the technical term that describes the phenomenological device which permits us to discover what Merleau-Ponty calls the spontaneous surge of the lifeworld. To come to an understanding of the unique meaning of something we need to reflect on it by practising the eidetic reduction.

In the eidetic reduction one needs to see past or through the particularity of lived experience toward the *eidōs* that lies on the other side of the concreteness of lived meaning.

The eidetic reduction is not a simplification, fixation, or contraction of the world into a system of eidetic concepts—rather it is the exact opposite: the eidetic reduction makes the world appear as it precedes every reflection, in all its dynamic flux, robustness, and fragility. The eidetic reduction strives to fuse the reflective and the prereflective life of consciousness. So Merleau-Ponty stressed that (unlike Husserl perhaps) we should not see the reduction as an end in itself. Rather the reduction is a means to an end: to be able to return to the primal world as lived in its full ambiguity, contingency, and transitory existence—but in an enriched and deepened fashion. In this sense, the reduction is “the ambition to make reflection emulate the unreflective life of consciousness.”

*(14)...there is not a human word, not a gesture, even one which is the outcome of habit or absent-mindedness, which has not some meaning.*

Everything has meaning. The big things are in the small things.

*(15)...It [phenomenology] is as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne--by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world...*

Merleau-Ponty refers to the work of artists to indicate that the search for meaning requires sensitive attentiveness to how things are given to us, as well as patience, desire and perhaps a certain talent for insight to capture the meaning of things—even if this is ultimately an impossible endeavor.

As Merleau-Ponty describes phenomenology in this Preface and his subsequent writings—can we ever truly make contact and retrieve “brute meaning” of the “wild being” of human existence?