

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, academic philosophy's tendency toward pedantic specialization and superfluous textual analysis has been the target of considerable criticism, especially by academic philosophers themselves. The title of the present work, *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, is apt to raise suspicions along these lines. First of all, beyond the small group of scholars specializing in Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, or the still smaller group with an interest in both, who, indeed, would take an interest in such a topic? And, second, the very idea of an entire collection with the structure "X's reading of Y's reading of Z" seems likely to inspire the kind of meta-referential vertigo associated with recent fads in literary criticism. Yet, while such criticisms may at times be justified, they would be unfounded in the case of the present work. In fact, it would not be overstating to assert that this volume addresses an issue central to the future of philosophy that carries repercussions extending across disciplinary boundaries.

For a start, it is worth pointing out that phenomenology, broadly understood, has inspired nothing less than a world-wide revolution in philosophical thinking during its first century, as well as extending its influence far beyond the academic discipline of philosophy to establish phenomenological branches in such disciplines as anthropology, architecture, geography, law, nursing, psychology, and sociology.¹ Even so, the importance of phenomenology for academic philosophy has been difficult to assess, especially in the United States, where the term "phenomenology" has often been used loosely as a methodological equivalent for the geographical designation "continental philosophy."² Certainly recent movements treated as part of "continental" theory—e.g., structuralism, post-structuralism, or critical theory—cannot be considered part of the phenomenological tradition strictly speaking, and in many cases the proponents of these theoretical movements take their point of departure precisely in a criticism and rejection of phenomenology's central method-

1. For entries on phenomenology in these disciplines and the influence of phenomenology throughout the world, see the *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, ed. Lester Embree et. al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997).

2. This is adequately shown by the diverse philosophical methodologies represented at the annual meetings of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP), which has been described as the largest annual meeting of "continental philosophers" in the world.

ological tenets. But this reaction against phenomenology is also a certain debt to it, in that those schools of thought included under the rubric of “continental” philosophy have in general defined themselves either as beginning from or against phenomenology, that of Husserl in particular.³ If this is so, we are justified in seeing phenomenology as the shared central core of continental philosophy throughout the last century, and Husserl is analogously the shared central core of phenomenology: he is, to use my co-editor’s expression, the “trunk” of the Continental “tree.” Even though analytic philosophy remains the dominant tendency in certain parts of the world (especially in English-speaking countries), there are many indications that even here philosophy is heading toward a more pluralistic future, one in which the sharp factional boundaries of the past few generations are no longer as easily drawn. There are good reasons to believe, then, that the success phenomenology has achieved in other disciplines and countries will have a growing effect on philosophy in these more anglophone areas. Our future is clearly bound, therefore, to Husserl’s legacy, and the recognition of this fact may account for the growing international revival of interest in “classical” phenomenology.⁴

Even so, the question remains of what phenomenology will make of itself in this open future: what will future generations of “phenomenologists,” in philosophy as well as other disciplines, mean by the term “phenomenology”? It is here that the issues raised in Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Husserl have their decisive force. As has been recognized many times (and most recently in the Preface above), Merleau-Ponty was certainly not a Husserl scholar in any strict sense of the term. Yet if he were no more than a commentator on Husserl, such attention to his reading of Husserl would be both unnecessarily redundant, since we could simply return to the primary

3. Lester Embree has developed this line of thinking in some detail in his as yet unpublished manuscript, “Husserl as Trunk of the American Continental Tree.” It is also worth re-emphasizing here, as Embree has noted, the extent to which such figures of recent interest as Derrida and Levinas, while often treated as post-phenomenological, insist on the necessary role of phenomenology in their own thinking.

4. I am using this expression, as I have elsewhere, not to imply the relegation of this tradition to a merely historical importance but, on the contrary, to suggest that it has become a “classic” in Merleau-Ponty’s sense of the term, i.e., that it institutes a tradition of thought that retains and rewards perennial attention. See Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 16–7; *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 10–1.

source himself, and of questionable value for anything more than intellectual history. I do not mean to denigrate the importance of examining the history of philosophy (quite the contrary, as my essay in this volume attests), but there is little call for commentary on commentators, and for good reason. If Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl demands a properly philosophical examination, this is so precisely because it marks the confrontation of two original thinkers. And the topic of this confrontation is nothing other than the question that faces us squarely today: what is the proper scope, method, and future of phenomenology?

It is probably unnecessary to admit at the outset that the present volume will not answer this question, and it may well be that questions of this form do not admit of straightforward answers. There is admittedly considerable difficulty involved in clarifying the question itself. Since the time when we first began collaboration on this project, my co-editor and I have returned often to debate on this very topic, e.g., whether necessary conditions for phenomenology as a deep historical tradition can be specified (cf. his remarks on noema in the above Preface). Of course, the difficulty of defining phenomenology is also already noted by Merleau-Ponty in his famous Preface to *Phénoménologie de la perception*, written to answer the very question, "What is Phenomenology?" Admitting straightaway that this question "has by no means been answered," Merleau-Ponty writes the following:

the opinion of the responsible philosopher must be that *phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking, that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy.*⁵

While this characterization may be appropriate for its time, it does no more for us today than make the issue more pressing: has phenomenology arrived, in the meantime, at "complete awareness of itself as a philosophy"? Should it be striving to do so? Is any such "complete awareness" even possible within the limits of phenomenological investigation, as espoused by either Husserl or Merleau-Ponty? It is to such significant questions that each of the essays in this volume points, more or less explicitly, and we could well have

5. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), ii; *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962; rev. 1981), viii. The emphasis is Merleau-Ponty's.

sub-titled this volume "What is Phenomenology?" The absence of a final consensus in answering such questions, and even on the form of the questions themselves, will perhaps be understandable to our reader.

Nevertheless, the dialogue crystallized in this volume is certainly a new stage in phenomenology's self-understanding, for the simple fact that the question of Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl has been raised explicitly for its first extended consideration. The willingness of our contributors to wade into this troubling confluence of ideas, and their open-minded consideration of issues that might, in other contexts, arouse partisan responses, certainly deserves appreciation. As editors, it has been our key goal to encourage just such open dialogue among the wider audience of scholars inspired by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, to urge them to reject the caricatures that pepper contemporary literature in favor of closer examination both of texts and of other matters themselves. The future of phenomenological philosophy lies, we believe, in this direction.

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The essays in the volume are divided topically into three groups, the first of which, "Merleau-Ponty as a Reader of Husserl," deals with the general issues raised by Merleau-Ponty's Husserl-interpretation, i.e., whether this interpretation is true to Husserl's text and to the "spirit" of Husserl's philosophy. To begin the volume, Dan Zahavi's essay, "Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: A Reappraisal," starts from the surprising fact of the rejection of Merleau-Ponty's Husserl-interpretation by many Merleau-Ponty scholars. While Merleau-Ponty himself finds in Husserl a philosophical approach compatible on many key points with his own, the general consensus has been that Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl is more creative than faithful. Zahavi, by contrast, believes Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl to be ahead of its time and largely borne out by posthumously published material and still unpublished manuscripts. To make his case, Zahavi draws on material from throughout Husserl's oeuvre to portray a Husserl startlingly close to that championed by Merleau-Ponty himself, concentrating on certain key themes: the nature of the reduction, reciprocity and reversibility in the constitution of nature and incarnated subjectivity, the constitutive role of embodiment, the significance of operative intentionality, and the claim that transcendental subjectivity gives way to transcendental intersubjectivity. While not denying significant differences between the two philoso-

phers, nor that there are other tendencies within Husserl's thought that Merleau-Ponty does not pursue, Zahavi concludes that Merleau-Ponty's reading avoids many still common misconceptions of Husserl's enterprise and demonstrates a closer congruence between his and Husserl's thought than is found in other post-Husserlian phenomenologists.

Elizabeth A. Behnke's essay "Merleau-Ponty's Ontological Reading of Constitution in *Phénoménologie de la perception*," is less sanguine about the congruence of Merleau-Ponty's project with that of Husserl. After taking note of the interpretative context (shaped in part by the earlier work of Scheler, Stein, and Fink) and the general strategies that inform Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of the concept of constitution, Behnke charts the dialectical stages of this appropriation in Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception*. To Kant and the early Husserl, Merleau-Ponty attributes a negative, "intellectualist" conception of constitution, portraying it as the meaning-giving activity of an absolute consciousness before which the world is transparently displayed. As an alternative, Merleau-Ponty offers a positive account of constitution as a creative and dynamic event that takes its impetus not from the experiencing agent but rather from the "spontaneous upsurge of the world." But this latter, positive version of constitution always implies a certain pre-given ontological stratum, and Merleau-Ponty uses this account of constitution as a springboard to turn toward interpretive questions of fundamental ontology. Behnke expresses concern that, whatever its value for Merleau-Ponty's purposes, his treatment fails to appreciate the essential methodological role that constitution plays in Husserl's descriptive phenomenological analyses—analyses upon which Merleau-Ponty's own work relies. This disparagement of constitutive phenomenology in favor of interpretive ontological speculation has, in Behnke's view, encouraged the emphasis on text interpretation that characterizes our current philosophical climate. As antidote, she recommends a return to the consultation and description of experiential evidence as advocated by Husserlian philosophical practice.

Although it could just as easily have been included in the following section on method, Thomas M. Seebohm's essay, "The Phenomenological Movement: A Tradition without Method? Merleau-Ponty and Husserl," is included here for its value as an introduction to the general problematic that Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl raises. For Seebohm, borrowing from Spiegelberg, phenomenology in the strict sense is characterized by a concern with the *how* of givenness, while phenomenology in the broad sense, the