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# Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Reduction in Phenomenology

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**Abstract:** In this article we will approach, from Merleau-Ponty, the perspective of genetic phenomenology that describes the origin of all acts, objects and forms of consciousness investigating their structure. This phenomenology undertakes a description of experience in its genesis of constitution, the origin of the very acts of constitution prior to the giving of meaning operated by the pure self.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Perception, Reduction, Merleau-Ponty

## Introduction

In 1942, Van Breda sent Merleau-Ponty a copy of his doctoral thesis defended at Louvain in 1941 entitled "The Phenomenological Reduction in Husserl's Last Philosophy." Merleau-Ponty also consulted in 1939 Husserl's Sixth Cartesian Meditation. In 1944 he had at his disposal in Paris the Third Part of *Krisis*, the German edition of the Cartesian Meditations, the unpublished Idea of Phenomenology and 870 pages of group C dealing with the problem of temporality. We see, therefore, that even before the elaboration of the Phenomenology of Perception Merleau-Ponty was already in contact with the perspective of genetic phenomenology that describes the origin of all acts, objects and forms of consciousness investigating their structure. This phenomenology undertakes a description of experience in its genesis of constitution, the origin of the very acts of constitution prior to the giving of meaning operated by the pure self.

## Development

The issue of reduction was an issue on which Husserl had been working his whole life. In Husserl, the reduction appears according to the very evolution of his thinking. Early in his career he understood phenomenological reduction as the bracketing of the existence of things. Thus Husserl remained bound by a double rationalist assumption. He first believed that existence is separable from the meaning of things, or that existence is not a predicate, then that existence is beyond doubt. It is an aspect of the reduction that manifests itself in the motto "return to the very things," which prescribes for the phenomenologist to turn to pure concepts as they

appear before any deformation or alteration produced by philosophy or scientific knowledge.

Factitious existence is not beyond doubt, but partakes of the certainty of one's consciousness. The first objective of the phenomenological reduction is as it presents the first volume of the Ideas,

(...) show the need for a pure element that can serve as a starting point for radical thinking, an absolute foundation of knowledge, namely: The cogito, thanks to the notion of intentionality as *Sinngebung* (Zuben, 1982, p. 85).

Reduction is presented as the return to a transcendental consciousness before which the world extends into absolute transparency. Therefore, as we better indicate, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy resumes in its own way some concepts of Husserl and with this one can see the extent of phenomenological influence, especially that of the last phase of Husserl, where the philosopher held his own attention, making the return to things the cradle of meaning. However, the first phase of Husserlian phenomenology, that of the Logical Investigations, the Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy and the Cartesian Meditations is considered by Merleau-Ponty from a renewal of phenomenology that is no longer a pretense of strict science to become a guideline for the thoughtless. At the same time, he resumes, in his own way, the phenomenological reduction, which instead of leading us to a pure ego, must lead us to an incarnate subject, situated in the world before reflection. Merleau-Ponty returns to *Lebenswelt*, to the world of life, to the

very things like the cradle of meaning. Husserl's second phase, for Merleau-Ponty, far from necessarily leading to Idealism, contains in germ the central themes of an existential philosophy. Merleau-Ponty could not be more emphatic in stating that if Phenomenology is regarded as the study of essences, it is also a philosophy that puts essences back into existence (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. I). The idealistic presumption that appears in this definition contrasts with the new acquisitions of existential posture. "Far from being, as it was believed, the formula of an idealistic philosophy, the phenomenological reduction is that of an existential philosophy" (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. 37). Therefore, even starting from the pre-objective knowledge that is as manifested in Husserl's *Lebenswelt*, Merleau-Ponty turned away from him in search of the genesis of the phenomenon of perception which became a privileged path, falling short of reflective consciousness and beyond any form of empiricism.

Perception then appeared as original logos, revealing new relationships between consciousness and its exterior. With Merleau-Ponty, perception brought the sensible back to philosophical reflexivity where the original logos was established in a zone of latency, confusing itself with existence, in which the so-called pre-objective, pre-objective, is rooted. -reflexive and pre-conscious: A background or horizon always already there, a unity supposed by all reflection (Zuben, 1982, p. 5).

In taking phenomenology as a mode of thought, Merleau-Ponty did so in a special way, leaving his mark, resuming and deepening the reduction that, for him, instead of leading to a pure Ego, must lead to an incarnate subject, situated in the world before reflection. Merleau-Ponty's deepening of the reduction led him to a different foundation from the Husserlian, but inspired, as seen, in Husserl's later theory of the world of life, which announced a total openness to the outside world and also, because we are a relationship with the world from beginning to end, says Merleau-Ponty. This renewed view of phenomenology, realizing early on that it is not the point of view of the subject that counts first and no longer dealing with the subject-object dualism, allowed the philosopher to radically eliminate the ruptures between the lived and the thought. For Merleau-Ponty to go to things is to be-for-the-world, in an indestructible relationship with the transcendent outer world.

The notion of *Lebenswelt*, reformulated by Merleau-Ponty, "ceases to be conceived as a set of structures of experience in implicit correlation with transcendental consciousness and starts to indicate the world prior to the constituent activity of subjectivity" (Ferraz, 2008, p. 175). Thus, there is an anteriority of mundane existence in relation to the formulation of essences, which exhibit the invariant features of this world.

The genesis of phenomena will not then be forwarded by Merleau-Ponty to transcendental consciousness; In fact, to understand it, it is a matter of seeking perceptual experience along the path of Husserl and *Lebenswelt* from which it opens (FERRAZ, 2008, p. 175).

It is not for a transcendental phenomenology that one can clarify the meaning of *Lebenswelt* phenomena, but for a phenomenology that exposes the main characteristics of the being of the sensible world in which one discovers a reversibility between sentient and sensible, that is, an interiority in the perceived world, named with the proto-concept of flesh and which points to a working reflection in the Being itself: "The sensible is not only the things, it is also everything that is drawn in it, even in low relief, everything that leaves its trace, everything which appears in it, even as a deviation and as a certain absence" (Merleau-Ponty, 1991, p. 190). According to Merleau-Ponty, it is not possible to make explicit a consciousness that actively constitutes the meaning of lived experiences. "The world far from manifesting itself as a set of phenomena ordered by the knowing subject, springs in perception as content not constituted by it, but to which it responds" (Ferraz, 2008, p. 175).

Merleau-Ponty has transformed Husserl's influence into a doctrine of his own and Husserl's philosophy, in the French philosopher's view, omits the perceptive experience and the naive and natural experience of his considerations around knowledge about man and existence. in: A coexistence of mutual implication, in which both belong to the same background of reality, being bound to the world, in a relationship of compromise, in the form of two inextricable facets. Therefore, the world is not distinguished from me as a sum of things or processes linked by causal relations, I "discover it 'in me' as a permanent horizon of all my reflections and as a dimension to which I do not leave to situate me" (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. XIX). In making such statements, Merleau-Ponty stands in the way of Husserlian phenomenology, which takes as its way of reflection and approach, but deepens its conclusions in order to recover the situation of the subject in the world, radicalizing towards a renewal. of the notion of subjectivity.

The slogan of phenomenology, to return to things themselves, acquires in this movement a concrete sense of return to the world prior to knowledge; to a point that, unlike Husserl, is not completely transparent to consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty formulates a very particular conception of phenomenological reduction, criticizing the Husserlian conception of reduction for understanding that it breaks the "fabric that connects us to the world

and consequently reconstitutes the existence of the world through the acts of a solitary transcendental consciousness" (Barbaras, 1997, p. 62). Husserl used the reduction to escape the split between a psychic interiority and an objective world, unveiling the intentional relationship between any possible phenomenon and transcendental subjectivity, for once the epoché is held, the suspension of judgment as to the belief in the independent existence of the world, objects and events are no longer regarded as distinct from their phenomenal manifestations. Thus, the a priori of the correlation is revealed, that is, a principle relation between phenomenon and consciousness. For each object

(...) corresponds to an ideal system of possible cognitive processes by virtue of which the object and the truths about it would be given to any cognitive subject. There is no phenomenon that is not given to any consciousness, which is not circumscribed by the cognitive possibilities of some subjectivity; and in turn there is no consciousness that is not intentionally linked to any phenomenon. A deep relationship between subjectivity and transcendence is thus undone. The Cartesian problem of knowledge correspondence to things. Once the reduction is made, the enigma of the relationship between an interior and an exterior independent of each other dissolves (Ferraz, 2006, p. 70).

Merleau-Ponty and Husserl take different positions. For Husserl, "reduction, rather than resulting in the suppression of any and all problem of the possibility of knowledge, reduction will represent (...) the only means of access to the authentic territory in which the question can be investigated" (Moura, 1989, p. 223). In a regime of reduction, "it is no longer about knowing how subjectivity can know an exterior, but how a multiplicity can be the presentation of something identical" (Moura, 1989, p. 224). Freed from the problem of correspondence between interiority and exteriority, phenomenology investigates the syntheses responsible for the constitution of the object in the flow of phenomena apprehended by transcendental consciousness, exposing the intentional unity between consciousness and phenomenon, the reduction suppresses, in advance, the mystery of the relations between subjectivity and the world.

For Merleau-Ponty, the reduction exhibits the original character of the phenomenal field, the spontaneous arrangement of the sensible sets of lived meanings through which one has contact with the world. Thus, the problem of the possibility of experience gives rise to an investigation of the field in which the a priori of correlation is first realized, assuming the concrete root

of the subject in the world. As a starting point, as Merleau-Ponty states, "the world is there before any analysis I can make of it and it would be artificial to derive it from a series of syntheses that would link the sensations" (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. V), then the perspective aspects of the object, when both are precisely products of analysis and should not be performed before it. We can exemplify this indentation as follows:

(...) I began to reflect, my reflection is reflection on an unthinking, it cannot ignore itself as an event, so it manifests itself as a true creation, as a change in the structure of consciousness and it is recognize to him, beyond his own operations, the world which is given to the subject, because the subject is given to himself. The real must be described, not constructed or constituted. This means that I cannot assimilate perception into syntheses that are of the order of judgment, deeds, or predication (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. VII).

For Merleau-Ponty, it is in the thoughtless, in the world that is there, prior to science that the cogito must recognize its foundation and this is how the phenomenological reduction aims to point to an existential philosophy. In the sense that it is a kind of formula or path that makes this foundation possible. In this context, the reduction is not intended to remove the cogito from the world to a pure consciousness and cannot be considered as an idealistic enterprise that seeks a reflexive return to the inner human being and Ponty intends to find a new way of seeing rationality itself, because:

The true cogito does not define the existence of the subject by the thought of existence that he has, does not convert the certainty of the world into certainty of the thought of the world and, finally, does not replace the world itself with the meaning world. On the contrary, he recognizes my own thinking as an inalienable fact and eliminates any kind of idealism by revealing me as "being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. IX).

Therefore, reduction does not mean a withdrawal from the world toward the unity of consciousness as the foundation of the world. This means that thought does not subsist on its own and that one always thinks of something, for if experience were constituted by the acts of transcendental subjectivity, then all the "concrete wealth of the world" should have its possibility referred to the absolute ego (Ferraz, 2006, p. 67).

We are never the thoughtless subject we seek to know; but neither can we become fully consciousness, reduce ourselves to transcendental consciousness. If we

were consciousness, we should have, as systems of transparent relations, the world before us, our history, the objects perceived in their uniqueness.

Merleau-Ponty adds that it would be contradictory:

(...) to affirm at the same time that the world is constituted by me and that from this constitutive operation I can only grasp the design and the essential structures; I need to see the existing world appear and not only the idea world, at the end of the constitutive work, in the absence of which, I would only have an abstract consciousness and not a concrete consciousness of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. 502).

Merleau-Ponty, in criticizing Husserl's attributions, makes him strongly inspired by Husserl himself, for at this point the main sources of consultation of the French philosopher were Husserl's unpublished manuscripts in Lovaine's archives. Merleau-Ponty shows, first of all, how Husserl remains attached to the subject-object dichotomy, precisely to the dichotomy which the *Phenomenology of Perception* aims to overcome in view of sensitive experience.

Thus, the author points to the exaggeration of transcendental orthodoxy, since the perceived reality, although solid, never presents itself as a set of relationships arising from subjective activity. Experience has an inherent opacity that makes it irreducible to the transcendental subject. Thus, "the lived world cannot be equated with an essence produced by the absolute ego and its almost miraculous presence has no place in the rigid Husserlian scheme" (Ferraz, 2006, p. 67).

## Conclusion

For Merleau-Ponty, reduction is intended to make the world appear as it is before any return to ourselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. XVII). It is clear that consciousness is no longer first and thus "the true transcendental is the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, p. 418). By returning to the first experience, as Merleau-Ponty conceives it, the notion of closed consciousness about itself is surpassed, taken as the starting point and primordial guarantee of knowledge. Consciousness becomes openness to the other as itself. With this, our author recognized in her the world project, destined for the world, a world that she does not embrace or own, but toward which she does not cease to move.

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## Ethics

This article was built with a view to the researcher's reflection on the ethical issues involved in his research and his commitment to ethical principles and procedures. We take into account that ethical issues should permeate the entire research process, from project design to dissemination of its results. Because of this we affirm that the research is original and is part of a research for the elaboration of a doctoral thesis in the scope of the Graduate Program in Education of the Federal University of Santa Catarina.

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