

Phenomenology vs the Myth of the Given: A Sellarsian Perspective on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty¹

Carl B. Sachs
Department of Philosophy
Marymount University
csachs@marymount.edu

0. Introduction

According to a familiar narrative, Western academic philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by two prominent and ambitious programs: logical positivism and transcendental phenomenology. Both programs were announced to the world with revolutionary ambitions, and both programs have subsequently received so much sustained criticism from so many quarters that their moments have passed (which is not to deny that they retain their eloquent adherents even today). Insofar as ‘the owl of Minerva takes light only at dusk,’ it is only after these programs no longer compel us that we can genuinely understand them, and in that sense – as heirs to the demise of these programs – understand who we (*qua* members of an intellectual community with a distinct history) were. One impediment to such historically mediated self-clarification has been the differences between these programs, at least with respect to how they are memorialized and institutionalized – hence the very distinction between “analytic” and “Continental” philosophy.

Yet we are now twenty years into 21st century philosophy, and we are in a better position to critically assess the limitations of “analytic vs Continental philosophy” as a narrative about who we were, are, and could (perhaps) become. As one indication of how the analytic/Continental divide no longer grips our collective imagination, post-phenomenological philosophers who are classified, to

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some extent or another, as ‘speculative realists’ or ‘speculative materialists’ find arguments in Wilfrid Sellars and other Pittsburgh School post-positivist philosophers that justify a rejection of phenomenology *tout court*. It is no longer entirely shocking to see Sellars discussed by “Continental” philosophers (Brassier 2007, 2011, 2014; Gironi 2018). There is, however, a danger of uncritical acceptance of the dogma “phenomenology is a version of the Myth of the Given”. Hence what is needed is an open-ended, non-dogmatic conversation as to whether or not phenomenology is a version of the Myth of the Given. Can one help oneself to the assumptions (if there are any), methods (if there are any), and results (if there are any) of phenomenological description without invoking something as Given in precisely the pejorative sense that was the target of Sellars’s infamous critique?

To articulate a few of the difficulties that confront us here: one may naturally respond that while Sellars’s criticism of the Myth of the Given may possibly have amongst its targets some versions of positivism, direct realism, or phenomenalism, phenomenology is a distinct approach to philosophy and sufficiently far removed that Sellars’s criticism is without relevance. To be sure, the preponderance of Sellars’s work – including “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” – is directed towards his own analytic contemporaries. Yet at the outset of EPM Sellars indicates the scope of his ambitions:

Many things have been said to be "given": sense contents, material objects, universals, propositions, real connections, first principles, even givenness itself. And there is, indeed, a certain way of construing the situations which philosophers analyze in these terms which can be said to be the framework of givenness. This framework has been a common feature of most of the major systems of philosophy, including, to use a Kantian turn of phrase, both

"dogmatic rationalism" and "skeptical empiricism". It has, indeed, been so pervasive that few, if any, philosophers have been altogether free of it; certainly not Kant, and, I would argue, not even Hegel, that great foe of "immediacy". Often what is attacked under its name are only specific varieties of "given." Intuited first principles and synthetic necessary connections were the first to come under attack. And many who today attack "the whole idea of givenness" -- and they are an increasing number -- are really only attacking sense data. For they transfer to other items, say physical objects or relations of appearing, the characteristic features of the "given." If, however, I begin my argument with an attack on sense-datum theories, it is only as a first step in a general critique of the entire framework of givenness. (EPM §1/SPR pp. 127-128)

In keeping with Sellars's thought that "the entire framework of givenness" takes on characteristically different shapes across the tradition, whereby even traditionally opposed views such as phenomenalism and realism could both be party to it, the question I want to pursue here is *not* whether phenomenology succumbs to the empiricist version of the Myth, or the rationalist version, or the Kantian version, but rather, is there a *specifically phenomenological* version of the Myth of the Given? If so, is this essential to phenomenology so that to abandon the Myth of the Given is to abandon phenomenology *tout court*, or could there be versions of phenomenology which are free of the Myth of the Given? (For reasons of brevity, I shall not discuss Sellars' own views about phenomenology, save to note that he regarded as a strategy, on par with conceptual analysis, for explicating the manifest image.)

I begin with a criticism of Soffer's (2003) argument that Husserl does not commit the Myth of the Given, taking her argument to diagnose the interpretative difficulties in constructing a

conversation that does justice to all participants (§1). I shall then turn to Husserl and argue that in the stage of his work where he is occupied with static transcendental phenomenology, the Myth of the Given can be found in his understanding of the noesis-noema correlation (§2). Finally, I shall conclude by relating this discussion to Robert Hanna's recent distinction between "the Myth of the Given" and "the Grip of the Given," and thereby to contemporary discussions about conceptual and non-conceptual content, to show how Merleau-Ponty exhibits a version of phenomenology that avoids the Myth successfully (§3). For this reason, the Myth of the Given is not essential to phenomenology, but it may be difficult to avoid entirely.

1. Critique of Soffer's Defense of Phenomenology

In her "Revisiting the Myth: Husserl and Sellars on the Given," Soffer notes that Husserl might be thought vulnerable to the Sellarsian critique of the Myth of the Given due to his influence on Chisholm: if one reads Sellars as accusing Chisholm of holding onto the Myth of the Given, then perhaps this is due to Husserl's influence on Chisholm.² However, she argues both that the Myth of the Given is irrelevant to phenomenology and that phenomenology offers insights obscured by Sellars' excessive emphasis on language. Soffer notes that there is little, if any disagreement between Husserl and Sellars about whether "empirical knowledge requires concepts, inferences, and language" (302). On her reading, Sellars holds that "the essence of the Myth of the Given is to think that there is nonlinguistic, nonconceptual, noninferential awareness which can either serve as evidence for or itself constitutes empirical knowledge" (305). Already at this point we should

² Importantly, Husserl is not mentioned by name in the Sellars-Chisholm correspondence, and Sellars' occasional references to Husserl or to phenomenology does not show that he thought of phenomenology in those terms, though he clearly did think of phenomenology as the explication of the manifest image.

note that Sellars urges a distinction between noninferential knowledge and presuppositionless knowledge: “It might be thought ... that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential. This, however, as I hope to show, is itself an episode in the Myth” (EPM § 32/SPR 164). The Myth, then, is *not* the assumption that non-inferential awareness can play some epistemic role. Rather, we should be wary of the assumption that we need some fundamental stratum of presuppositionless knowledge in order for there to be any at all. In that light, however, the emphasis in phenomenology with pure descriptions of experience once all presuppositions have been suspended, might be an episode in the Myth after all.

To correct Soffer’s understanding of Sellars, I shall begin by following the “Master Argument” interpretation of the Myth developed by deVries and Triplett (2000). On their interpretation, the Given is an epistemological mistake that involves thinking that anything can be both “epistemically efficacious” (playing an epistemic role) and “epistemically independent” (resting on no other presuppositions of any kind). To be brief: on their interpretation of Sellars, knowledge of facts can be epistemically efficacious but not epistemically independent (since it depends on a great deal of “knowing how”), whereas awareness of sensations or *sensa* can be epistemically independent but not epistemically efficacious (since sensations lack propositional structure and cannot serve as premises).³ It is because nothing can be both epistemically efficacious and epistemically independent – which is what the Given would have to be – that it is a myth. Although this does not show that phenomenology does commit the Myth of the Given, it does raise the possibility in a way that Soffer’s misunderstanding of Sellars enables her to avoid considering.

³ For the complete version of this highly compressed argument, see deVries and Triplett (2000).

The possibility of a phenomenological version of the Myth is raised, ironically, by Soffer's own argument for why phenomenology has advantages over Sellars's positive view. Soffer maintains not only that phenomenology evades the attack on the Myth of the Given but also highlights deficiencies of Sellars' 'psychological nominalism': that "*all awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc., in short all awareness of abstract entities — indeed, all awareness even of particulars — is a linguistic affair*" (EPM §29). Psychological nominalism allows Sellars to insist that all categorical frameworks – the framework of categories such as 'sort,' 'fact' 'abstract entity', 'particular' – are re-acquired (with modification) from generation to generation, and so are not antecedent to the acquisition of natural language.⁴ As he puts it, "the primary connotation of 'psychological nominalism' is the denial that there is any awareness of logical space prior to, or independent of, language" (EPM § 31). By contrast, Husserl holds that "the noticing of individuals and their individual features occurs prior to and as a condition of the formation of general concepts" (Soffer 2005, 311). If this requires that there be an *awareness* of a logical space *as* a logical space in the absence of an acquired language, then it we are indeed dealing with a version of the Myth.

Yet this depends on how exactly we understand "noticing." If this noticing amounts to the claim simply that "Husserl holds that there is some form of perception which is not predicatively shaped and does not presuppose socially transmitted verbal language" (314), then it not at all clear whether Sellars would disagree. Certainly Sellars acknowledges that there are *aspects* of perception which are not predicatively shaped, a point he stresses as when he says, "*something, somehow* a cube of pink in physical space is present in the perception other than as merely believed

⁴ Put otherwise, to believe that categorical framework *is* antecedent to the acquisition of natural language is to fall prey to "the Augustinian picture" of language as criticized in the opening sections of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

in” (“Some Reflections on Perceptual Consciousness” IV.35). All Sellars need hold is that, *however* one distinguishes between perception and judgment, the non-predicative aspects of perception do not contribute to the justificatory role of perceptual episodes, although those aspects do (and indeed must) play other explanatory tasks.

If the Myth of the Given is just a commitment to epistemological foundationalism in general and of sense-data theories in particular, then it is relatively straightforward Husserl does not commit to the Myth, since he is not committed to epistemological foundationalism, and certainly not to phenomenalism. Unfortunately, Soffer does not fully appreciate that the Myth is more protean than the specifically empiricist version that Sellars examines in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” and “Phenomenalism”, the primary Sellarsian texts she uses. In fact, misunderstanding about the scope of the Myth is widespread; for example, Watkins (2008) argues against the criticism, raised in somewhat different ways by Sellars and by McDowell, that Kant commits the Myth of the Given. But what Watkins shows, at best, is that Kant does not commit the Myth *in its empiricist version*; he does not show that there is not a *specifically Kantian version* of the Myth. In light of the idea that “often what is attacked under its name are only specific varieties of ‘given,’” I shall now argue that just as there could be distinctively Kantian (and perhaps even Hegelian) versions of the Myth, so too that there is a distinctively phenomenological version of the Myth.

At this point, however, I must introduce a further distinction in the catalog of the Myth of the Given. Up to this point I have been following de Vries and Triplett in regarding the Myth as fundamentally an epistemic issue. However, O’Shea (2009) stresses what he calls “the Myth of the Categorical Given”: here the issue is not about warrant *per se* but the much more fundamental issue concerning our basic cognitive orientation as being in the world. As Sellars put it in a relatively

late text (1980): “*To reject the Myth of the Given is to reject the idea that the categorial structure of the world – if it has a categorial structure – imposes itself on the mind as a seal on melted wax*” (§ 45; reprinted in Scharp and Brandom (eds) 2007, p. 237; emphasis original). The Myth is not simply that no element in our cognitive economy can be both epistemically independent and epistemically efficacious; it is that any classification system that an animal (even a ‘rational animal’) uses to cope with and navigate the world includes the representational dynamics of the cognitive system distinct of that animal, whether learned or innate. Hence it is not possible for any cognitive system to find itself equipped with categories that magically mirror the world’s own structure (if it has one).

The reason why the Myth of the Categorial Given matters to phenomenology – as it does to Kant – is that phenomenology purports to disclose *the mind’s own categorial structure*. But if the mind is no more given to itself than the world is given to the mind – if our self-understanding is as mediated and fallible as is our understanding of the world – then the Myth of the Categorial Given applies to the phenomenology. I shall now argue that there is a recognizable and important kind of phenomenology that is vulnerable to this Sellarsian criticism.

2. Static Phenomenology as the Myth of the Given

More specifically, my concern here is with “static phenomenology,” the project that finds expression in *Logical Investigations* and *Ideas I*; I leave it as future work whether genetic phenomenology and generative phenomenology are vulnerable to the criticisms I will raise here about static phenomenology. Following Zahavi (2003), static phenomenology aims

to account for the relations between the act and the object. It usually takes its point of departure from a certain region of objects (say, ideal objects or physical objects) and then investigates the intentional acts that these objects are correlated to and constituted by. This investigation must be characterized as static since both the types of objects and the intentional structures are taken to be readily available. (94)

A further distinction concerns Husserl's transition from phenomenology to *transcendental* phenomenology between *Logical Investigations* (1900/1901; trans 1970) and *Ideas I* (1913; trans. 1982). To unpack this conception of static transcendental phenomenology or static phenomenology, I now turn to its presentation in *Cartesian Meditations* (1931; English trans. 1988).⁵

The central idea of STP is the infamous “phenomenological reduction” arrived at the *epochē*, the ‘bracketing’ or ‘suspending’ of one’s presuppositions, posits, ontological commitments, explanatory procedures, etc. to yield a pure description of lived experience. The *epochē* does not dispute the reality of the world, but rather re-inscribes our taking-the-world-to-be-real as a taking-to-be-real-for-consciousness. This is why Husserl says that the “*epochē* with respect to all worldly being does not at all change the fact that the manifold *cogitationes* relating to what to what is worldly bear this relation *within themselves*” (CM 32). Central to the descriptive project here is the act-object model of intentionality, or to use Husserl’s terms, “*noesis*” and “*noema*.” Of

⁵ Although *Cartesian Meditations* were not translated into English until 1988, Sellars’ allusion to EPM as his “*Meditations Hegeliennes*” (EPM §20) suggest that Sellars read the 1931 French translation by Peiffer and Levinas. Sellars’s MA director, Marvin Farber, reviewed this edition; see Farber (1935).

particular interest here is how Husserl articulates the attitude of phenomenological reduction itself:

The phenomenologically altered – and, as so altered, continually maintained – attitude consists in a *splitting of the Ego*: in that the phenomenological Ego establishes himself as ‘disinterested on-looker’, above the naively interested Ego. That this takes place is then itself accessible by means of a new reflection, which, as transcendental, likewise demands the very same attitude of looking on ‘disinterestedly’ – the Ego’s sole remaining interest being to see and describe adequately what he sees, purely as seen, as what is seen, and seen in such and such a manner. (CM 35)

This standpoint of purely disinterested contemplation allows us to describe the *correlation* between the acts of consciousness (*noeses*), and the objects of consciousness (*noemata*). Thus, Husserl informs us that “[t]he general descriptions to be made, always on the basis of particular *cogitationes*, with regards to each of the two correlative sides” (CM 36), yielding both “noematic descriptions” and “noetic descriptions” which are “characterized descriptively as *belonging together inseparably*” (39; emphasis original); likewise, “when phenomenological reduction is consistently executed, there is left us, on the noetic side, the openly endless life of pure consciousness and, as its correlate on the noematic side, the meant world, purely as meant” (CM 37).

Importantly, Husserl stresses that neither the objects of consciousness nor the acts of consciousness are Given: “[t]his sense, the cogitatum qua cogitatum, is never present to actual consciousness as a finished datum; it becomes ‘clarified’ only through explication of the given horizon and the new horizons continuously awakened” (CM 45). The senses or meanings that consciousness takes as its objects are continually explicated, and so are not to be conceived as fixed and indubitable as the sense-data of the naïve empiricist. Likewise there is an infinite

multiplicity of acts of consciousness that cannot be exhausted. Hence the Myth of the Given does not lie in the *noeses* or in the *noemata* alone. Rather it lies in *the correlation between them*, for it is the correlations that are purely described by the transcendental ego: “Each type ... is to be asked about its noetic-noematic structure, is to be systematically explicated and established in respect of those modes of intentional flux that pertain to it, and in respect of their horizons and the intentional processes implicit in their horizons, and so forth” (CM 51) and “Every object that the ego ever means, thinks of, values, deals with, likewise each that he ever phantasies or can phantasy, indicates its correlative system and exists only as itself the correlate of the system” (CM 65).

Since the categorial structure of the world is precisely what is bracketed by the *epoche*, we are not dealing with here with a ‘realist’ version of the Myth of the Categorial Given. But there is *something* imposing itself on the mind “as a seal on melted wax” – *and that is the mind itself*. More precisely, the correlations between noesis and noema. The correlation must be Given because it cannot be posited or mediate. It cannot be posited because the correlation is revealed by the *epochē*, and the *epochē* just is the rejection or suspension of posits. Nor is the correlation *itself* mediated by conceptual analysis – the correlations between the acts and objects of consciousness are simply laid out before the disinterested gaze of the transcendental ego. If we think about the Myth through Sellars’ metaphor of “the seal on melted wax,” then static phenomenology is Mythic in the relevant sense. Hence the categorial structure of the mind, transcendently conceived as the modalities of correlation or the mode of givenness, imposes itself on the sustained attention of the practicing phenomenologist, precisely as a seal on melted wax, in order to yield pure descriptions of transcendently ideal activities. To use Meillassoux’s term, what is Mythic about static

phenomenology is precisely its “correlationism”.⁶ Correlationism is Mythic due to the foundational role within the total system as the *presuppositionless* condition of possibility of cognitive experience, just because our awareness of the correlation is achieved when *all* presuppositions are suspended, i.e. when the phenomenological reduction is complete. In short, static phenomenology, far from completely breaking with the naivety of previous philosophies, *transfers* that dogmatism from the world to the mind (transcendentally considered). While this does not conclusively establish that static transcendental phenomenology is completely flawed, it does establish that there is a distinctively phenomenological version of the Myth of the categorial Given.⁷

3. Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology and the Grip of the Given

But if STP is a version of the Myth, what does that portend for phenomenology in general? In his late (and, during his lifetime, largely unpublished) work, Husserl introduced other kinds of phenomenology – in particular, “genetic phenomenology” and “generative phenomenology” – which Merleau-Ponty studied carefully. For this reason I want to turn now to Merleau-Ponty’s transcendental phenomenology of embodied perception in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty does not require that we prescind from all presuppositions: “we must – precisely in order to see the world and to grasp it as a paradox – rupture our familiarity with it, and this rupture can teach us nothing except the unmotivated springing forth of the world. The most important lesson

⁶ See Gironi (2018) for comparisons of Sellars and Meillassoux.

⁷ However, I do *not* purport to have demonstrated exactly what is *wrong* with the Myth of the Categorial Given. Instead my conclusion is more cautious: *if* there is a good argument showing that the categorial Given is a myth, *then* that argument would apply to static transcendental phenomenology as well.

of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (*PP* lxxvii). Since we never arrive at a stratum of pure description spread out before a disinterested transcendental Ego, Merleau-Ponty thereby avoids what Sellars calls “the metaphor of the mental eye” (ITSAP in SPR 308-309).

The phenomenological reduction allows us to recognize that the perceptual field of human experience has a basic structure irreducible to propositional thought and that “The world is not what I think, but what I live through” (*PP* lxxx). Hence Merleau-Ponty *displaces* the originally given noesis-noema correlation with a more basic account of intentionality, pre-reflective or motor intentionality. What initially appeared in Husserl to be fundamental and original is grounded in a more fundamental kind of intentionality that does not have the act/object structure of the noesis-noema correlation.

Merleau-Ponty offers a new concept of intentionality, which is the intentionality of embodied perceiving itself, as distinct from the intentionality of thought, what Reuter (1999) calls “prereflective intentionality”. On the new understanding of perceptual intentionality, we will appreciate that “[t]o perceive in the full sense of the word (as the antithesis of imagining) is not to judge, but rather to grasp, prior to all judgment, sense immanent in the sensible” (*PP* 36). Hence it follows that “judging is not perceiving” (36) and “perception is not an act of the understanding” (*PP* 54). We must distinguish in an entirely new way between “judgment” and “the milieu of experience in which judgment is born” (*PP* 198) by recognizing that, in contrast to Kant, “[t]he unity and identity of the tactile phenomenon are not produced through a synthesis of recognition in the concept, they are established upon the unity and identity of the body as a synergetic whole” (*PP* 330). What we discover here is a kind of intentionality that does not employ the kind of intentionality manifest in our conceptual capacities.

To be sure, Merleau-Ponty accepts a weak and incarnate correlationism of body and world; as he puts it, “the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those of others through a sort of gearing into each other” (lxxxiv) “the pre-objective unity of the thing is the correlate of the pre-objective unity of the body” (328) “the precise gearing of my gaze to the objects” (291), and most significantly, “If the body provides the ground or the background to the perception of movement that perception needs to establish itself, it does so as a perceiving power, insofar as it is established in a certain domain and geared into a world” (ibid.). Yet Merleau-Ponty also stresses that the correlations are not Given, since “I say that I perceive correctly when my body has a precise hold on the spectacle, but this does mean that my hold is ever complete; it could only be complete if I had been able to reduce all the object’s interior and exterior horizons to the state of articulated perceptions, which is impossible” (311) and “the system of experience is not spread out before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator of it, I am part of it, and it is my inherence in a point of view that at once makes possible the finitude of my perception and its opening to the total world as the horizon of all perception” (317). Since the correlations themselves cannot be fully displayed before the pure gaze of the transcendental Ego, they cannot be Given in the pernicious sense that Sellars enjoins us to avoid.

To refine further just how Merleau-Ponty avoids the Myth, I want to briefly examine what is distinct about his philosophical method. I take Merleau-Ponty’s method to be dialectical in a sense roughly following that of Westphal (2003). Let us distinguish between (a) the conception of the object; (b) the experience of the object; (c) the experience of ourselves as cognitive subjects; and (d) our conception of ourselves as cognitive subjects. The dialectical method consists, in its most stripped-down form, of (1) noticing the discrepancy between (a) and (b); (2) a change in (c) as a

result of bearing witness to that discrepancy; (3) reflecting on the discrepancy between our experience of ourselves as cognitive subjects and our conception of ourselves as cognitive subjects, and (4) revising our self-conception accordingly. Merleau-Ponty does this by working through the antinomies of theoretical psychology, thereby inviting the reader to re-orient towards a phenomenology of perception and embodiment.

In order to disrupt the grip that the dominant theories of mind -- what he calls “empiricism” and “intellectualism” – have on us, Merleau-Ponty arranges an encounter between these theories and facts of human perception. Regardless of whether we begin with “empiricism,” and attempt to explain experience in terms of causal interactions between atomic components (“sensations”), or with “intellectualism” and attempt to explain experience in terms of a unified consciousness that acts on what is given to it, we will in either case be driven to contradictions. The entanglement of explanation and description comes through vividly in Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical argument for the transcendental status of motor intentionality. By showing that neither intellectualism nor empiricism can account for the diversity of normal perceptual phenomena nor for pathological cases such as the strange case of Schneider, Merleau-Ponty confronts our established scientific theories with their own limits. Likewise, in his analysis of the relationship between perception and movement, Merleau-Ponty works through both empirical psychology and *a priori* epistemology before concluding, “we can side with neither the psychologist nor the logician, or rather we must side with both of them and find the means of recognizing both thesis and antithesis as true” (285). He thereby confirms the importance of dialectics; he avoids the Myth of the Given just because the dialectical method is exactly what is required in order to liberate transcendental

reflection from the Myth of the Given.⁸ The radical, distinctive nature of embodied perception is understood and articulated through the conceptual activity involved in contrasting from (and in relation to) scientific knowledge. If this argument shows that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment is not a self-standing disclosure of categorical consciousness, then it is not Given in the pernicious sense.

3. The Myth of the Given and the Grip of the Given

I will now turn to the relevance that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment has for contemporary debates about non-conceptual content, as one might think, following Sellars and but especially McDowell, that one cannot countenance non-conceptual content without re-invoking the Myth of the Given. In two recent papers, Robert Hanna (2011a, 2011b) argues that the critique of the Myth of the Given, as an argument for conceptualism about representational content, cannot be the threat that conceptualists such as John McDowell (1994) have taken it to be. That critique can fuel an attack on a "sensationalist" conception of non-conceptual content, but this, Hanna maintains, is "not really a thesis about *representational* content at all, but rather only a generally discredited thesis about how *phenomenal* content relates to conceptual content" (Hanna 2011b, 326; emphasis original). Here Hanna offers a fascinating, high-altitude narrative of the reception of Kant and Hegel in early 20th century epistemology by which he concludes that "what is being rejected by McDowell under the rubric of 'non-conceptual content' is nothing more and nothing less than *Hegel's misinterpretation of Kant's philosophy of cognition*" (ibid. 327; emphasis

⁸ This is not to say either that Hegel himself is entirely free of the Myth nor that Merleau-Ponty is entirely free from the Myth in *PP*.

original). The lesson we ought to draw from this account, Hanna argues, is that we should distinguish between the Myth of the Given and what he calls the Grip of the Given:

Non-Conceptualism is a thesis about *representational content*, and *not* about sensory or phenomenal content – even if Non-Conceptualism does indeed have some non-trivial implications for the nature of sensory or phenomenal content. So it is nothing but a philosophical illusion to think that the Myth of the Given actually applies to Non-Conceptualism. This illusion can thereby be aptly dubbed *The Myth of the Myth of the Given* ... Non-Conceptualism says that our pre-discursive and essentially embodied encounters with the world, insofar as they are directly referential, and insofar as they are guided and mediated by non-conceptual content, are inherently *proto-rational cognitive* and *practical* encounters, not *non-rational*, *non-cognitive*, and *non-practical* encounters with it. (ibid. 327)

Hanna calls this essentially non-conceptual content “the Grip of the Given” (ibid.). I agree with Hanna that the Grip of the Given is necessary for singular cognitive reference and competent judgment and inference.⁹ However, Hanna makes two mistakes; the first is to underestimate how protean the Myth of the Given is, and the second is to underestimate what must be done to avoid it. Hanna mistakenly claims that the Myth of the Given is a pseudo-problem that arises from Hegel’s misreading of Kant as a subjective idealist *malgré lui*; it is, rather, a problem about how we are to account for categorial consciousness without invoking an essentially non-mechanistic or magical process in which the categorial structure of the world is imposed on the mind as a seal on melted

⁹ On Hanna’s construal, “the Myth of the Given” holds that “non-conceptual content is nothing but the unstructured causal-sensory ‘given’ input to the cognitive faculties, passively waiting to be carved up by concepts and propositions” (Hanna 2011a, 40). By contrast, as he puts it, “the Grip of the Given” states that “essentially non-conceptual content can provide rational human minded animals with an inherently spatio-temporally situated, egocentrically-centered, biologically/neurobiologically embodied, pre-reflectively conscious, skillful perceptual and practical grip on things in our world” (Hanna 2011a, 41).

wax. For this reason the Myth of the Given is just not about the self-authenticating authority of episodes of *phenomenal* consciousness; it is the Myth as “the doctrine of the mental eye”, or the thought that the categorial structure of the world – or of the mind – is authoritative for us *simply* by virtue of *being seen* as such. Thus, while I concur with Hanna that we need room for ‘the Grip of the Given’ in our philosophy of mind, we must also notice that Merleau-Ponty makes room for this concept precisely through a dialectical encounter between phenomenology and the sciences. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty’s account, unlike Husserl’s static phenomenology, is free from the Myth of the Given.

4. Conclusion

I have resisted the urge to treat the question “does phenomenology run afoul of the Myth of the Given?” as having a straightforward answer – or even an obvious meaning. If anything, the discussion has thus far been at a stalemate due to mutual misunderstanding. While Soffer’s argument that Husserl is wholly innocent of committing himself to the Myth relies on a widespread misunderstanding of what the Myth consists in, I also think that the wholesale dismissal of phenomenology on the grounds that it does commit itself to the Myth is also misguided. At any rate one would need to do a good deal of careful analysis in order to establish the very sense of the question, let alone answer it. If phenomenology really does run afoul of the Myth of the Given, then what we find in Sellars is the sort of argument that would be valuable for post-phenomenological Continental philosophers – not least for the insights to be gleaned from comparison with their own. Thus Sellars’s criticism of the Myth invites comparisons with Hegelian responses to phenomenology (Adorno 1982) and with a speculative realist criticism of

correlationism (Meillassoux 2008; see also Sparrow 2014). Likewise, to the extent that Merleau-Ponty's texts are regularly mined for insights to be deployed in enactive cognitive science and neurophenomenology (e.g. Thompson 2007), there are questions of philosophical methodology that can no longer be avoided. If the Myth of the Given is a problem for *all* phenomenology, that will be a problem for how Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Hans Jonas have been taken up in contemporary enactive cognitive science.

This is not to say that phenomenologists are not entitled to a rejoinder. If anything, the battle has not yet been fully joined even up to this point; till now there is scant evidence that phenomenologists have even understood the Sellarsian criticism, let alone begun to formulate a cogent response to it. My goal in this paper was to help clarify to phenomenologists what the Myth of the Given is and to what extent this is a genuine problem for phenomenology even today. It is not for me to judge if I have succeeded in this aim.

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