Wittgenstein and the phenomenological movement: Reply to Monk

Andreas Vrahimis

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**Abstract**

Monk’s ‘The Temptations of Phenomenology’ examines what the term ‘Phänomenologie’ meant for Wittgenstein. Contesting various other scholars (Hintikka & Hintikka, 1986; Spiegelberg, 1968; Gier, 1981), Monk claims that Wittgenstein’s relation to ‘Phänomenologie’ began and ended during 1929. Monk only partially touches on the question of Wittgenstein’s relation to the phenomenological movement during this time. Though Monk does not mention this, 1929 was also the year in which Ryle and Carnap turned their critical attention toward Heidegger. Wittgenstein also expressed his sympathy for Heidegger in 1929. Furthermore, though in 1929 Wittgenstein agrees with the early Husserl on relating logic and science to phenomenology, it is not clear that they mean the same thing by either logic or phenomenology, or that they agree on what the relation between the two should be.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Husserl, Phänomenologie, phenomenological movement

**1. Introduction**

Wittgenstein’s remarks on phenomenology were first published as part of *Philosophische Bemerkungen* in 1964*,* more than a decade after his death. Four years later, Herbert Spiegelberg responded by outlining six questions that frame the examination of Wittgenstein’s relation to phenomenology. In ‘The Temptations of Phenomenology’, Monk’s primary concern is to provide answers to Spiegelberg’s first and fourth questions, namely ‘What did Wittgenstein really mean by “Phänomenologie”?’ (quoted on p. 4) and ‘what role the notion played in his philosophical development’ (p. 7).[[1]](#endnote-1) Monk claims that by getting the correct answers, the answer to ‘when and why Wittgenstein abandoned the term’ (p.7) (which forms Spiegelberg’s third question) is reached. Monk also answers part of Spiegelberg’s second question regarding when Wittgenstein first adopted the term.

All the above relate to another part of Spiegelberg’s second question, namely that regarding Wittgenstein’s relation to ‘the phenomenological movement of the time’ (quoted on p. 4), which Monk very briefly touches on. With the exception of this latter issue, my response to Monk shall not focus on his answers to the prior questions which, as in Spiegelberg’s case, ‘presuppose a much fuller knowledge of Wittgenstein’s philosophy than I can muster’ (quoted on p. 5). What follows restricts itself to a number of comments on the relation between the phenomenological movement, Wittgenstein, and early analytic philosophers he was in touch with at the time**.**

According to Monk, there are three possible ways to interpret Wittgenstein’s use of ‘Phänomenologie’: (i) Wittgenstein was a phenomenologist sometime between 1913 and 1929 (as the Hintikkas hold),[[2]](#endnote-2) (ii) the flirtation with phenomenology lasted for a few months in 1929, or (iii) Wittgenstein became a phenomenologist in 1929 and remained so for the rest of his life (a position held by Spiegelberg[[3]](#endnote-3) and Gier[[4]](#endnote-4)). Monk attempts to demonstrate the truth of (ii). Monk clarifies, however, that he does not wish to challenge a toned down version of (iii) according to which Wittgenstein’s later work is in some sense phenomenological. After what one might call Wittgenstein’s brief ‘flirtation’[[5]](#endnote-5) with phenomenology in 1929, his work, Monk contends, is neither strictly speaking Husserlian, nor post-Husserlian phenomenology.[[6]](#endnote-6)

**2. Wittgenstein and Heidegger**

Monk contrasts Wittgenstein’s relation to phenomenology with the distinction between analytic philosophy and phenomenology presented at the 1959 Royaumont colloquium. In particular he refers to ‘Ryle’s dismissive attitude towards Husserl’ which ‘contrasted sharply with his admiration for Wittgenstein’ (pp. 2-3). Yet this contrast is complicated by Ryle’s claim that *The Concept of Mind* ‘could be described as a sustained essay in phenomenology, if you are at home with that label’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Furthermore, it would be inappropriate to describe Ryle’s presentation of Wittgenstein in that paper as one of ‘admiration’ without clarifying that Ryle’s intention is to counter the idea that philosophy should follow some master-thinker.[[8]](#endnote-8) A related misunderstanding allowed the Royaumont colloquium to be seen as a clash between analytic philosophy and phenomenology: Ryle was asked by Merleau-Ponty whether he was member of a philosophical school founded by Russell and Wittgenstein, to which Ryle replied that ‘I hope not’.[[9]](#endnote-9) This was then misquoted, making Ryle appear to be saying that he hopes that he is not a phenomenologist.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Ryle started his academic career as a phenomenologist (and despite subsequent polemical remarks this might have influenced his later work).[[11]](#endnote-11) And he was not the only philosopher close to Wittgenstein that was, at the time, interested in phenomenology.[[12]](#endnote-12) Rudolf Carnap studied under and was influenced by Husserl, though after 1928 there are few references to Husserl in his work.[[13]](#endnote-13) By contrast, Moritz Schlick had already been involved in a polemical exchange with Husserl a decade earlier, and as Monk also mentions (p. 9), referred to Wittgenstein in his arguments against phenomenology in 1929.[[14]](#endnote-14)

In 1929 Carnap and Ryle both seem to have turned their attention towards a significant development in the phenomenological movement, namely Heidegger’s rise to prominence through his assumption of Husserl’s chair at Freiburg. Ryle’s first publication, in 1929, was a review of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*, which though otherwise largely sympathetic, concludes that ‘*qua* First Philosophy Phenomenology is at present heading for bankruptcy and disaster and will end either in self-ruinous Subjectivism or in a windy mysticism’.[[15]](#endnote-15) In that same year, Carnap had met with Heidegger at the ‘Locarno for intellectuals’,[[16]](#endnote-16) a gathering of Francophone and Germanophone philosophers at Davos, where Heidegger would dispute with the leading Marburg Neo-Kantian, Ernst Cassirer. After Heidegger’s supposed ‘victory’ at Davos,[[17]](#endnote-17) followed by Heidegger’s inaugural lecture at Freiburg titled ‘What is Metaphysics?’, Carnap would start using phrases from Heidegger (e.g. ‘Das Nichts nichtet’) as examples of metaphysical nonsense.[[18]](#endnote-18)

During the last months of 1929,[[19]](#endnote-19) apart from the comments on Husserl Monk mentions, Wittgenstein would also claim that

I can readily think what Heidegger means by Being and Dread. Man has the impulse to run up against the limits of language. Think, for example, of the astonishment that anything exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer to it. Everything which we feel like saying can, a priori, only be nonsense. Nevertheless, we do run up against the limits of language.[[20]](#endnote-20)

It is not clear, thus, that Wittgenstein would agree with Carnap regarding the polemical conclusions the latter reaches through seeing Heidegger’s work as nonsense.[[21]](#endnote-21) Wittgenstein’s declaration of sympathy for Heidegger appears to be in line with Monk’s claim that Wittgenstein had his mind set against phenomenology by the end of 1929.[[22]](#endnote-22) It might be a form of the temptation towards phenomenology that Wittgenstein had recently overcome which leads Heidegger to ‘run up against the limits of language’.

Of course this would hinge on the relation between Wittgenstein’s remarks on Heidegger and his conception of phenomenology. Could a turn by Wittgenstein towards phenomenology in 1929 be one that is completely unaffected by this turn against Heidegger by figures who were close to him? It will suffice for now merely to suggest how one might begin attempting to find an answer to Spiegelberg’s second question. We do not have any proof that Wittgenstein had read either Husserl or Heidegger. It is more likely that Wittgenstein’s relation to the phenomenological movement was mediated by discussions others around him were having about it at the time. It is likely, for example, given that Wittgenstein had met Ryle at the joint conference of The Aristotelian Society and The Mind Association in 1929,[[23]](#endnote-23) when *Mind* had just published Ryle’s review of Heidegger, that Wittgenstein might have read it.[[24]](#endnote-24) And, though Wittgenstein last saw Carnap at the beginning of 1929 (before Carnap went to Davos),[[25]](#endnote-25) he probably had heard of Carnap’s views of Heidegger through other Circle members. Phenomenology was, so to speak, in the air around Wittgenstein in 1929.

**3. Are Wittgensteinian and Husserlian phenomenology ‘exactly the same’?**

Though Monk dedicates most of his paper on discussing exactly what Wittgenstein may have meant by phenomenology, he does also briefly discuss what Husserl had meant by the term. Monk focuses on the *Logical Investigations*, which has been more widely read and discussed by analytic philosophers than much of Husserl’s subsequent work.

As Monk points out, the first edition of the *Investigations* aligns phenomenology with ‘descriptive psychology’ (a title inherited from Brentano). The term phenomenology loosely relates to the epistemological project of investigating the origins of the basic concepts of logic. Precisely what Husserl meant by logic has been the subject of debate.[[26]](#endnote-26) Husserl had been aware of his contemporary developments in mathematical logic, and had even been among the first Germanophone philosophers to mention Frege’s contributions to the subject. Yet he was partly critical of such conceptions of logic, preferring the view that philosophical logic involved a broader discussion of the subject. Following Bolzano, Husserl saw logic as a kind of theory of science (*Wissenschaftslehre*), unifying the various special sciences.

Already here we face a possible inconsumerability between Husserl’s and Wittgenstein’s take on phenomenology. There is firstly the question of whether their conceptions of logic are potentially incompatible, and furthermore the question regarding their views of the relation between logic and phenomenology. Clearly both thought that phenomenology and logic are interwoven in some way. Monk focuses on Wittgenstein’s view that phenomenology is ‘midway between logic and science’ (quoted on p. 1). In 1900, Husserl may be interpreted as seeing phenomenology as either prior to logic (*qua* *Wissenschaftslehre*), or part of it (given a broad enough conception of logic). It is not immediately clear that this is exactly what Wittgenstein had in mind. Even if the early Husserl comes close to Wittgenstein in thinking of phenomenology, logic, and science as intimately related, it would take a lot more interpretative work to show whether they agree on the kind of relation that holds between the three.

As Husserl’s account of phenomenology evolved, he sought to divorce phenomenology from its relation to logic, seeing its application to logic in the *Logical Investigations* as only one of its many possible phenomenological exercises. It is, nonetheless, with this later Husserlian view that Monk compares Wittgenstein’s phenomenology. As Monk points out, the epistemological project laid out by the first edition of the *Logical Investigations* is transformed by Husserl’s subsequent insistence on separating phenomenology from empirical research of any kind in the second edition. Phenomenology puts aside the ‘naturalistic attitude’.

Monk claims that the later Husserl’s distinction between ‘the phenomenological and the naturalistic’ is the same as that drawn by Wittgenstein during his phenomenological period. Unfortunately, Monk does not qualify this further, other than by saying that both Husserl and Wittgenstein wanted to look at phenomena themselves by separating them from naturalistic hypotheses. Monk is clear regarding what Wittgenstein means by this, which has something to do ultimately with the impossibility that ‘immediate experience’ (p. 33) may contain contradictions: something cannot be both red and blue at the same time. But it is not altogether clear that Husserlian phenomenology consists in examining this sort of ‘immediate experience’.[[27]](#endnote-27) It would take much more by way of interpretative work on Husserl than may be undertaken within the bounds of this study to either prove or disprove this association.

It is hard to accept, without further ado, Monk’s claim that Wittgenstein’s discussion of ‘Phänomenologie’ can be characterised as doing ‘exactly the same thing’ (p. 32) as what the later Husserl was doing. This, however, is far from being Monk’s main contention. Despite being too brief, it points towards a promising direction which scholars have not yet adequately explored. Hopefully this reply contributes somewhat toward clearing the path for more scholarship to follow.

1. **Notes**

   As Monk points out, very little has been written on the subject. To his list of articles one could add: David Woodruff Smith, ‘Intentionality and Picturing: Early Husserl Vis-à-vis Early Wittgenstein’, The Southern Journal of Philosophy 40(1), (Spring 2002): pp. 153-180; Sara Heinämaa, ‘The Self and the Others: Common Topics for Husserl and Wittgenstein’, The Southern Journal of Philosophy 50(2) (June 2012): pp. 234-249. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Monk, p. 35; Merrill B. Hintikka, and Jaako Hintikka, *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Herbert Spiegelberg, ‘Wittgenstein Calls His Philosophy “Phenomenology”’, Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 13 (3), (1982), pp. 296-99. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Nicholas F. Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology: A Comparative Study of the Later Wittgenstein*, *Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See also J. O. Urmson, ‘Ryle, Gilbert’, in P. Edwards (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* , Vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 269. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Other commentators have suggested that Wittgenstein appropriated the term ‘Phänomenologie’ from Boltzmann, not Husserl (Byong-Chul Park, *Phenomenological Aspects of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998), p. 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gilbert Ryle, ‘Phenomenology vs. *The Concept of Mind*’, in *Collected Papers: Critical Essays*, Vol. 1 (London: Hutchinson, 1971), p. 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See e.g. ibid, p. 182. Ryle also disliked Wittgenstein’s tendency to attract disciples; see Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 275. By contrast to ‘Continental philosophy’, ‘analytic philosophy’ had, for Ryle, no place for discipleship. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. L. Beck, J. Wahl, J. O. Urmson, B. Williams, G. Ryle, P. F. Strawson, W. V. Quine, L. Apostel, E. W. Beth, J. L. Austin, R. Hare, *La Philosophie Analytique (Cahiers de Royaumont, Philosophie, No. 4)* (Paris: Minuit, 1962), p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Simon Glendinning, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy: A Philosophical Chronicle* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Amy L. Thomasson, ‘Phenomenology and the Development of Analytic Philosophy’, Southern Journal of Philosophy, 40(1), (Spring 2002), pp. 115-142. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Waismann, for example, ‘in private recommended reading Husserl’ (quoted in Wolfgang Huemer, ‘Logical Empiricism and Phenomenology: Felix Kaufmann’, in F. Stadler (Ed.), *The Vienna Circle and Logical Empiricism: Re-evaluation and Future Perspectives* (pp. 151-160) (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003), p. 153). Felix Kaufmann and Robert Neumann were considered phenomenologists by the rest of the group; see ibid. Kurt Gödel would later become interested in Husserl. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Guillermo E. Rosado Haddock, *The Young Carnap’s Unknown Master: Husserl's Influence on* Der Raum *and* Der logische Aufbau der Welt (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See M. M. Van de Pitte, ‘Schlick's Critique of Phenomenological Propositions’, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 45(2), (December 1984), pp. 195-225; Paul Livingston, ‘Husserl and Schlick on the Logical Form of Experience’, Synthese, 132(3), (September 2002), pp. 239-272. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Gilbert Ryle, ‘Review of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*’, Mind, 38(151), (July 1929), pp. 355-370, p. 370. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Quoted in Peter E. Gordon, ‘Continental Divide: Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger at Davos, 1929 – An Allegory of Intellectual History’, Modern Intellectual History, 1(2), (2004), pp. 219-248, p. 229. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The idea that this was a battle won by Heidegger is an exaggeration; See Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (US: Harvard University Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Hans J. Dahms, ‘Neue Sachlichkeit in the Architecture and Philosophy of the 1920s’, in S. Awodey, C. Klein (Eds), *Carnap brought home: the view from Jena* (pp. 357-376) (Chigago: Open Court , 2004), p. 369. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. According to Gordon Baker, these remarks were probably dictated on December 1929; see L. Wittgenstein, F. Waismann, & G. P. Baker, *The Voices of Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. xvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘On Heidegger on Being and Dread’, in M. Murray (Ed.), *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (pp. 80-83) (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 80. This sentence was omitted from the first English publication of this remark; see Michael Murray, ‘A Note on Wittgenstein and Heidegger’, The Philosophical Review, 83(4), (October 1974) pp. 501-503. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. But see e.g. Peter M. S. Hacker, ‘Wittgenstein, Carnap and the New American Wittgensteinians’, The Philosophical Quarterly, 53(210), (January 2003), pp. 1-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Wittgenstein’s later comments on Heidegger (L. Wittgenstein, F. Waismann, & G. P. Baker, *The Voices of Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 69-77) seem to elaborate on this theme. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 275. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See Jonathan Beale, ‘Nonsense *Par Excellence*: Wittgenstein on the Question of Being’, Proceedings of the Southeast Philosophy Congress, 3, (2010), pp. 13-27, p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Andreas Vrahimis, ‘Modernism and the Vienna Circle’s Critique of Heidegger’, Critical Quarterly, 54(3), (October 2012), pp. 61-83, pp. 74-75 includes further discussion of this. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. According to David W. Smith, ‘What is ‘Logical’ in Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*? The Copenhagen interpretation’, in D. Zahavi, (Ed.), *One Hundred Years of Phenomenology: Husserl’s* Logical Investigations *Revisited* (pp. 51-68.). (Dodrecht: Kluwer, 2002), p. 52, there are three possible approaches to the issue: (i) the whole of *Logical Investigations* is about logic (construed in its nineteenth century sense as a kind of philosophy of logic), (ii) only a small part of *Logical Investigations* is about logic (construed as what in the 19h century would be called *Logistik*) (iii) in the *Logical Investigations*, ‘logic as conceived today is integrated with speech-act theory, ontology, phenomenology, and epistemology’ (p. 52). Although the 21st century view of logic (what Smith calls the ‘Copenhagen’ interpretation of Husserl) is anachronistic when applied to Husserl, it is not completely implausible, given (i), that Husserl may have held it. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ayer, for example, sees it as a study of ‘concepts at work [...] very close in practice to the linguistic analysts’ (Charles Taylor, & A. J. Ayer, ‘Symposium: Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, *33*, (1959), 93-124, p. 121); see also Amy L. Thomasson, ‘Conceptual Analysis in Phenomenology and Ordinary Language Philosophy’, in M. Beaney (Ed.), *The Analytic Turn: Analysis in Early Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology* (pp. 270-284) (London: Routledge, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)