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Contaminating the Transcendental: Toward a Phenomenological Naturalism

Abstract: The proper relationship between phenomenology and naturalism has reemerged as a pressing issue following interdisciplinary developments in the cognitive sciences. Most solutions opt for a naturalized phenomenology, rather than a phenomenological naturalism. This paper takes up the latter approach, confronting the implications of Merleau-Ponty's reformulation of Husserl's paradox of subjectivity. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's formulation—which I term, “the paradox of madness”—reveals a deep, ontological contingency in what Husserl took to be necessary transcendental structures of consciousness and world, revealing that these transcendental structures are in fact embedded in and contaminated by the very world they constitute and disclose.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Naturalism, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, Psychopathology

Introduction

Edmund Husserl, in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, stumbles upon a curious paradox. He asks, how can I be a subject for the world, that is, the subject that constitutes the world, while at the same time being an object in the world? In other words, how can I be the very foundation of the world that my life seems to depend upon? In spite of the difficulties inherent in such a paradox, Husserl put forward a solution.¹ However, he admitted that the phenomenological project, by its very nature, will produce a series of paradoxes. These paradoxes, rather than revealing inadequacies inherent in the phenomenological project, stand as opportunities for new phenomenological insights. In solving

¹ For a detailed study of the paradox of subjectivity in Husserl's work, along with discussions of its origins in the work of Kant and its influence on Heidegger's thought, see Carr (1999).

each paradox we are forced to clarify aspects of the phenomenological project that had previously lingered in obscurity.

Further, Husserl anticipates the emergence of particular complications and paradoxes for the future of phenomenology. One of these paradoxes, he believes, will emerge in the confrontation with cases of insanity; that is, with cases of psychiatric and neurological disorders.² Such cases involve “intentional modifications” (Husserl 1936/1970, 187) of the “manner of transcendental” (187), complicating our ability to understand the transcendental structure of such persons by analogy to our own structure.

While it is clear that Husserl considered the emergence of such a paradox to be, in the end, soluble, I believe he underestimated its profundity. I argue that the paradox of madness, if we may call it by such a name, is insoluble. However, its insolubility may not be a blow to the credibility of phenomenology. Instead, I argue that phenomenology can embrace the paradox, rather than overcome it. I further argue that by embracing this paradox and following it to its logical conclusion, a phenomenological naturalism can be attained.³

2 In the same paragraph he also considers issues that will arise from studies of childhood and animal consciousness. While these issues are certainly worth investigating, my primary concern in this paper is with pathology, rather than typical development (of either humans or animals). Interestingly, this entire paragraph (Husserl 1936/1970, 187-8) can be read as an outline of Merleau-Ponty's life work (1942/1983; 1945/2012; 1964/1069).

3 A “phenomenological naturalism” must not be confused with recent attempts to naturalize phenomenology. Such attempts have been developed in a variety of directions, with the most common route being an appeal to Husserl's phenomenological psychology, arguing that all transcendental insights can be translated into naturalistic insights regarding the *a priori* form of consciousness, with consciousness being taken as a complex phenomenon in the natural world. Such accounts typically take phenomenology to serve the purpose of clarifying an explanandum so that it can be more readily explained by the natural sciences (e.g. Brown 2008; Gallagher 1997; Zahavi 2004; 2010). In contrast, others have confronted the issue from a standpoint that is more committed to transcendental philosophy (e.g. Crowell 2013; De Preester 2006; Moran 2008; 2013; Smyth 2010; Tengelyi 2013; Toadvine 1999). My project is more closely aligned with the latter group, ultimately seeking a phenomenological account of naturalism, rather than a naturalistic account of phenomenology. (Dan Zahavi, in his recent paper, “Naturalized Phenomenology: A Desideratum or a Category Mistake?,” (2013) argues for two routes towards a reconciliation of phenomenology and naturalism. The first is Husserl's phenomenological psychology, while the second is based in transcendental phenomenology's ability to question what “natural” and “naturalism” even mean. My project might be taken as a movement towards the latter solution.)

I. The Paradox of Madness

The challenge put forward in Husserl's paradox of madness was taken up by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. The paradox is addressed throughout the work, making its first appearance in Merleau-Ponty's engagement with the case of Schneider, where he develops an account of the existential ground of the structure of illness.

Critiquing a pure transcendental phenomenology, he argues that its analysis of illness is “less false than it is abstract” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 126). He claims that consciousness in the transcendental tradition is conceived as originary, directly present, transparent, and does not admit of degrees. This means that “The empirical variety of consciousness – morbid consciousness, primitive consciousness, infantile consciousness, the consciousness of others – cannot be taken seriously; there is nothing there to be known or comprehended. One thing alone is comprehensible, namely, the pure essence of consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 127). While such circumstances of human life are not altogether ignored, transcendentalism confines them to a plane of being that is founded upon, and does not intersect with, the ontological structures of human existence. This pure consciousness, standing as the existential ground for each and every mode of consciousness, is necessarily unchanging and eternal. As Husserl said, the transcendental ego is neither born nor dies.

But we are born, and our death is certain. There was a time before I had a world, and there will be a time when I have a world no longer. And in between, I may find myself in a world that does not follow the laws of the pure transcendental consciousness. The subject with schizophrenia has her very selfhood put into question. The voice that comes from her throat may belong to someone else. The thoughts arising in her mind may be placed there by another. And

those thoughts that are her own may be broadcast for all to hear. The subject with catatonic depression may find himself in a world devoid of meaning, if he can be said to find himself at all. He does not move because there is nothing that calls to him. His world has fallen mute, and him with it.

Equally complex forms of existence emerge in cases of neurological disorders, where subjects may feel limbs that no longer exist, see their loved ones as imposters, or be totally oblivious to the fact that half of their body does, in fact, belong to them. Merleau-Ponty engages with such complex phenomena with the case of Schneider, an injured WWI veteran whose world underwent a dramatic change in form after he was struck by a piece of shrapnel in his occipital lobe. His disorder is remarkably complex, seeping into nearly every aspect of his life, including the perceptual, bodily, linguistic, and imaginative. All of these aspects are tied, in one way or another, to vision. Yet no aspect of his disorder is entirely reducible to a visual anomaly (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 127).

One of the most striking changes in the ontological structure of Schneider's world is in his spatiality. As Merleau-Ponty explains, space, in classical psychology, is conceived of only in the objective sense, as a space that is completely mathematizable and could be expressed in a coordinate system. In contrast, Schneider “is conscious of bodily space as the envelope of habitual action, but not as an objective milieu. His body is available as a means of insertion into his familiar surroundings, but not as a means of expression of a spontaneous and free spatial thought” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 106). As Merleau-Ponty explains, we typically take consciousness of location as a representation of position. Location is always a determined point in the objective world (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 106). What we find with Schneider is a case

in which a certain kind of space (the abstract and objective) is lost, and another kind of space (the concrete and habitual) is retained.

What cases such as Schneider's reveal is a deep contingency in human existence. The admission of contingency in the structures of consciousness and the life-world had already arisen in Husserl's later works, from *Cartesian Meditations* to the *Crisis*, where he develops the beginnings of a genetic and ultimately generative phenomenology (Steinbock 1995b). However, it becomes apparent in the *Crisis* that such contingency has strict limitations. For Husserl, there is only ontic, not ontological, contingency.⁴ Throughout the *Crisis*, he shows that cultural *a priori*s, and even the *a priori*s of the sciences, are historically contingent. These *a priori* structures, however, are ultimately founded upon the ontological structures of the pure transcendental ego and the life-world. As he says, these structures are grounded upon “a universal *a priori* which is in itself prior, precisely that of the *pure* life-world” (Husserl 1936/1970, 141, my emphasis). These *a priori* structures—taken as pure, universal, and unchanging—are the subject matter of a strictly ontological inquiry.

What Merleau-Ponty discovers in his confrontation with the paradox of madness is that even the foundational, *ontological* structures of consciousness and worldhood are susceptible to contingency. And once such contingency is discovered, we are forced to reevaluate Husserl's

4 The possibility of contingency, by way of facticity and history, became extremely important in Husserl's genetic works (1931/1960; 1936/1970; 1918-26/2001; 1929/2008). This is illustrated in the work of Steinbock (1995a; 1995b) where he investigates the development of genetic phenomenology into generative phenomenology in Husserl's (mostly) unpublished works. However, even this generative development in Husserl's project did not allow for ontological contingency. The generative developments, while allowing for contingency at the societal and intersubjective level, remained ontic. (One possible exception to this is found in Husserl's discussion of a flying ark that leaves the earth for many generations (Steinbock 1995b, 119). Husserl argues that even if all past knowledge and culture were lost to this group of humans, the earth-ground would still be their primordial-ground. This is because their bodies, along with their ways of being embodied, developed in relation to the earth. However, it is not clear that Husserl considered the possibility of the human body further developing and evolving in light of its new circumstances.)

“solution” to the paradox of subjectivity.

Once the paradox of subjectivity reemerges in the form of the paradox of madness, it becomes apparent that Husserl was only able to dissolve the paradox by imposing an artificial constraint upon the degree of contingency in the subject. Husserl's “solution” amounted to a complete dehumanizing and decontextualizing of the transcendental ego. As he says, “in the epoché and in the pure focus upon the functioning ego-pole, and thence upon the concrete whole of life and of its intentional intermediary and final structures, it follows *eo ipso* that nothing human is to be found, neither soul nor psychic life nor real psychophysical human beings; all this belongs to the 'phenomenon,' to the world as *constituted* pole” (Husserl 1936/1970, 183, emphasis mine). This means that “the 'I' that I attain in the epoché [...] is actually called 'I' only by equivocation” (Husserl 1936/1970, 184). According to Husserl, the paradox of subjectivity was a mere illusion; the transcendental (ontological) ego, he argues, is not actually *in* the world, at least not to the degree that it can be exposed to, or conditioned by, the world. This is not to say that the subject that is in the world does not play any constitutive role. Rather, it means that the structures of subjectivity and worldhood that are formed through cultural and historical contingencies are only ontic structures, which are ultimately founded upon the necessary and universal ontological structures.

II. Contaminating the Transcendental

While Merleau-Ponty's discovery of contingent ontological structures of human existence adds much to the richness of phenomenological investigations, this still does not achieve a truly genetic phenomenology. Only after phenomenology has engaged in studies of the particular, concrete development of the ontological structures of human existence, taking account of the

kinds of circumstances that can and do effect change in these structures, can it be considered a truly genetic enterprise.

Merleau-Ponty said as much with the words, “So long as the means of linking the origin and the essence of the disorder has not been found, so long as a *concrete essence* or a *structure* of the illness that expresses both its generality and its particularity has not been found, so long as phenomenology has not become genetic phenomenology, then these offending retreats into causal thought and naturalism will remain justified” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 127-8). In other words, if phenomenology wishes to be justified in claiming that its method offers fundamental insights into the structure of illness, insights available to no other line of inquiry, it must reformulate itself in such a way as to confront these cases on their own terms, rather than artificially constraining them to the structure of a pure transcendental ego.

Merleau-Ponty shows us that if we take the transcendental ego in this ontologically pure form, phenomenology cannot do justice to the phenomenon of madness. In order to achieve such an end, phenomenology must reconceive the foundational nature of the transcendental subject. However, this does not mean that phenomenology must give up the transcendental entirely, becoming little more than a phenomenological psychology, ultimately subservient to the naturalism of the sciences.⁵ Instead, phenomenology, confronting the paradox of subjectivity in and through the paradox of madness, must affirm the reality of the paradox. That is, it must give

5 The possibility of phenomenological psychology was first discussed by Husserl (1927/1977). It is meant as a study of the *a priori* form or structure of consciousness *as* a complex phenomenon in the natural world. Husserl believed that all transcendental insights had mundane correlates, and as a result, he believed that the insights of transcendental phenomenology could be translated into naturalistic discourse in order to produce a phenomenologically informed psychology. This has been taken up as a possible solution to the phenomenology/naturalism debate in the work of Zahavi (2004; 2010; 2013) and Gallagher (2013). A related approach is taken by Braddock (2001), where he argues that phenomenology should be defined by its subject matter (which he takes to be first-person experience) rather than its method. My own proposal should be understood as distinct from these, as it does not culminate in the positing of a completely naturalized consciousness.

us a subject that is exposed (at its ontological core) to the forces of the very world it discloses and constitutes.

What this amounts to is a contaminated transcendental. The *a priori*, ontological structures of the world are contingent precisely because they are contaminated. And the contaminant is the world itself. But what is meant by the world itself? It means, at least, that which is constituted by the transcendental subject, including the layers upon layers of facticity and history that have built up over generations of communities of transcendental subjects, sedimenting into the structures that reciprocally determine how our facticity and history can show up for us.

But such a contaminant was already discovered by Husserl. The ontic structures of the life-world are contaminated by the meaning-content of the world they constitute. What this amounts to is a foundation that is contaminated by that which it founds. One of Merleau-Ponty's insights, however, is that such meaning-content may even penetrate the ontological, rather than just the ontic, structures of human existence.⁶

Yet, if this were all that was meant by the contamination of the transcendental, we would not be forced back into our paradox. We could simply admit that the ontological structures that are constitutive of the world are reciprocally altered by the facticity that these structures themselves determine and produce, without admitting that the ontological structures are wholly embedded in this factual world.

What Merleau-Ponty ultimately offers us is a much more problematic conception of

6 Merleau-Ponty's considerations of contingency in human existence is examined in M. C. Dillon's work, "A priority in Kant and Merleau-Ponty" (1987). However, even in this work, Dillon portrays the depth of contingency in Merleau-Ponty's work as penetrating only *a priori* concepts, rather than *a priori* existential structures. In other words, his interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's contingent *a priori* is one in which Merleau-Ponty has not actually moved beyond the later Husserl.

contamination, a conception in which the ontological structures of the world are contaminated by something they disclose but do not themselves constitute, and over which they have no power. When Merleau-Ponty brings phenomenology face to face with the case of Schneider, forcing phenomenology to confront the case on its own terms, rather than the terms set by transcendental idealism, he forces phenomenology to admit the contamination of the transcendental by the natural. As he says, “After all, Schneider's disorder is not initially metaphysical, for it was a piece of shrapnel that injured him in his occipital lobe” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 127).

No amount of meaning bestowing power will negate the effect that the piece of shrapnel, in its collision with Schneider's brain, has upon the structure of his world. The event of this collision sedimented into Schneider's facticity, not only as meaningful, but as brute.⁷ It is not the meaning of the shrapnel that threw his ontological structure out of alignment. It does not matter if he considers the shrapnel a blessing or a curse, whether it struck him in battle or while walking down the street. It does not matter if anyone knows the shrapnel is lodged in his brain or even if anyone knows that shrapnel exists at all. The power it displays in altering the ontological structure of Schneider's world comes neither from the human being, nor the transcendental subject. It comes from nature itself, as something that exists independent of us, but is certainly not inaccessible to us.

III. A New Naturalism

What does this mean for the future of phenomenology? What must phenomenology give up in the confrontation with a nature that it has no power over? Must phenomenology give up the

⁷ My use of the term “brute” is not meant to match on to “brute facticity” as discussed by some of the classical phenomenologists. Rather, I mean “brute” in the sense of “meaningless,” or “devoid of meaning.” While the piece of shrapnel is disclosed to us as having a power that exceeds our powers of world constitution, even the disclosure of the shrapnel *as* “brute” does not give it its power. It has a power that stands outside the realm of meaning.

goal of being the study of the transcendental ego as constituting power of the world? Or is there a sense of the transcendental that can be meaningfully retained?

Last year, Catherine Malabou asked us to relinquish the transcendental (2014). As a rejoinder, I ask, why relinquish what we can simply contaminate? Why take the paradox of madness as a sign of defeat when it could be a sign of revolution? A contaminated transcendental is still a transcendental, if by this we mean the *a priori* structures of consciousness and worldhood. What we relinquish is necessity and purity, not transcendentality. A transcendental that is contaminated by the natural is not of necessity reducible to the natural. Contamination may just mean contamination.

Phenomenology, in holding to its methodological commitment to return to the matters themselves, need not, and must not, hold to a metaphysical position that cannot do justice to the world before our eyes. Transcendental idealism would have us turn a blind eye to the profundity of psychopathology, infancy, and animality. It would have us constrain such phenomena to a transcendental system to which they do not belong for the sake of a metaphysical system that stands without justification.

To ask after the other side of this project of reconceptualization, if we are to embrace a phenomenology of the contaminated and contingent, where does this put naturalism? It puts it, I argue, exactly where it belongs. That is, within the purview of phenomenology itself. The recent decades have showered us with countless attempts to “naturalize” phenomenology. Such attempts have taken many forms, but the typical goal is to reconceive phenomenology in such a way that it serves the ends of a project it was originally meant to delimit and define.

What we come upon here is something quite different from a naturalized phenomenology.

It is, in contrast, a phenomenological naturalism. If phenomenology itself can discover nature in the contingency and contamination of the transcendental, why could it not also define and delimit this nature that it has discovered?

This, I argue, is precisely the project of a self-reflective phenomenology. In discovering phenomena that initially appear to limit its reign, phenomenology at first struggled to hold onto the metaphysical system it had built for itself. But it need not cling to such a system any longer, nor must it accept a limitation to its reign. The natural, *as that* which exists and has a power independent of any and all transcendental subjects, while not constituted by us, is at least disclosed by us. It is well within the purview of phenomenology to investigate the manners of givenness of the natural, as well as its proper relation to the transcendental. In this way, phenomenology can engage with both naturalism and the sciences on its own terms; terms that are philosophically sound and phenomenologically justified.

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