



## Phenomenology and Ancient Greek Philosophy: An Introduction

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## Phenomenology and Ancient Greek Philosophy: An Introduction\*

Phenomenology, broadly construed, is the study of the meaningful structure of human experience. It is a philosophical tradition that begins with Edmund Husserl, develops with thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and is still practiced today, contributing to diverse disciplines like health studies, education and political science. But while the contribution of phenomenology to the study of the self, the body and the world has been widely recognized, there is also another way in which phenomenology remains relevant today. Both phenomenologists and scholars of ancient Greek philosophy are becoming increasingly interested in examining the ways in which the phenomenological tradition intersects, sheds new light on, and re-appropriates Greek philosophy.

It is well known that Heidegger's thought showed a vigorous interest in ancient Greek philosophy, resulting in unorthodox and even violent interpretations of Greek texts. Notwithstanding the idiosyncratic nature of Heidegger's interpretations, his phenomenological readings of Greek texts during the 1920s exerted influence on a wide range of philosophers and scholars. Gadamer, for example, writes that he visited Freiburg in 1923 "not so much for Husserl's phenomenology as to learn about Heidegger's interpretations of Aristotle".<sup>1</sup> Strauss, Klein, Arendt and Gadamer are only a few of the philosophers who attended Heidegger's lectures and who continued to focus on Greek philosophy, albeit in ways that differ significantly from Heidegger's approach.

Heidegger, however, is not the only phenomenologist who sought to incorporate Greek philosophy into his thinking. Husserl, for example, made extensive use of Greek terms (e.g. epoché, noesis, noema, etc.) in order to introduce the innovative elements of his phenomenology. Apart from the appropriation of Greek terms for the explication of his own phenomenological intuitions, Husserl's work exhibits an interest in the genesis of meaning and its historical development, which brings about an explicit emphasis on ancient Greek thinking.<sup>2</sup>

Husserl's and Heidegger's understanding of their own philosophical projects as having a peculiar relation to a Greek origin, can be taken as an indication that a good understanding of the phenomenological tradition requires a thorough examination of its relation to Greek philosophy. The invigorating interpretations of ancient Greek philosophy offered by thinkers, strictly or loosely related to the phenomenological tradition, such as Arendt, Fink, Patočka and Levinas, to name a few, reinforces this view. Given the vast number of phenomenologists who have shown an interest in Greek philosophy, one way of doing research on the topic of *Phenomenology and Ancient Greek Philosophy* is to examine the various – and at times

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<sup>1</sup> Gadamer 142.

<sup>2</sup> Hopkins 5.

conflicting – ways in which ancient Greek thinking has been received by key figures of the phenomenological tradition. But this is only one way in which phenomenology and ancient Greek philosophy provide a fertile soil for research. Another way of approaching the relationship between phenomenology and ancient Greek philosophy is by examining how phenomenological themes such as embodiment, corporeality and authenticity can open a space of dialogue between the two traditions. Is ancient Greek thinking a place where phenomenological themes are foreclosed, or, is it possible to find in Greek thought insights that can help us enrich phenomenological research?

Questions like the above bring forth a second, and more dynamic way in which phenomenological research relates to ancient Greek thinking. Contemporary scholars of phenomenology sustain an interest in Greek philosophy and go back to ancient Greek literature with the aim of shedding light on sedimented meanings that determine who we are or how we currently think and act. However, they also do so with a view of examining how these texts can be enriched by, and at the same time enrich, phenomenological research.

The papers presented in this special issue contain both reflections on how key figures of the phenomenological tradition engage with ancient Greek thought as well as original and contemporary phenomenological projections to ancient Greek philosophy. This special issue does (and could not) purport to be exhaustive. Rather, it is guided by a moderate aspiration to contribute to a better understanding of the longstanding and ongoing relationship between phenomenology and ancient Greek philosophy.

In his paper “Husserl and the Greeks”, Dermot Moran provides an overview of Husserl’s relation to the Greeks starting from his first book, *Philosophy of Arithmetic*, and ending with some late supplementary texts from the *Crisis* manuscripts. Moran’s paper contributes to our understanding of Husserl’s relation to Greek philosophy in two important ways. First, by discussing Husserl’s extensive use of Greek terms. Second, by discussing Husserl’s gradual interest in the origin of the scientific (theoretical) attitude and by critically reviewing Husserl’s own attempt to situate his own transcendental phenomenological project within a Western philosophical tradition that begins with a breakthrough (*Durchbruch*) that occurs in Greek thinking. Moran shows that Husserl’s use of Greek concepts served the purpose of introducing his intuitions with terms that were free from philosophical presuppositions. But even if Husserl’s use of Greek terms does not imply a direct influence from Greek thought, Moran shows that Husserl does become gradually interested in a certain “breakthrough” that occurs in Greece. In the final section of his paper, Moran suggests that close to the final stage of his philosophical career, Husserl develops a notion of the “poeticizing of history” which points to a poetical interpretation of the history of philosophy.

In my paper “Heidegger’s Reading of Plato: On Truth and Ideas”, I focus on the diverse ways in which Heidegger engages with Plato’s work. I suggest that Heidegger’s relation to Plato cannot be reduced to the claim that Plato is the inaugurator of Western metaphysics. Notwithstanding Heidegger’s critical remarks about Plato’s understanding of truth and ideas in his 1942 essay “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth”, during the 30s Heidegger’s reading of Plato shows signs of a phenomenological appropriation which points to the uncovering of unrealized possibilities in Plato’s work. In other words, Heidegger opens up the possibility of thinking Plato not solely as a thinker that initiates the “false track” of Western thinking, but also as a thinker that safeguards a different path. I conclude by suggesting that Plato is for Heidegger a transitional thinker who points simultaneously toward two directions: to the derivative conception of truth (i.e. propositional truth) that dominates Western thinking, and the more original sense of truth that has remained unthought by the Western philosophical tradition.

In “The Permanent Truth of Hedonist Moralities: Plato and Levinas on Pleasures”, Tanja Staehler and Alexander Kozin develop a phenomenological account of pleasures by discussing

Plato, Levinas, and the Presocratics. They suggest that by going back to Plato and the Presocratics with the help of Levinas, we can bring forth an account of pleasures that alerts us to our bodily existence and vulnerability. In particular, they argue for a deep connection between Plato and Levinas on the topic of hedonism, which boils down to a common understanding of hedonism as a matter of the moment that is irreducible to an external goal. Drawing, among other things, on Levinas's discussion of Plato's *Parmenides*, the authors conclude that although pleasures are for the most part irreducible to an external goal, they nevertheless entail a fundamental otherness (be it the otherness of the elements, the otherness of the world or the otherness of the Other human being). Staehler and Kozin close their paper with a discussion of how Presocratic philosophy stresses our dependency to basic elements and brings us back to a place "where being a body is not opposed to something else that appears to bring us more dignity".

In "To Account for the Appearances: Phenomenology and Existential Change in Aristotle and Plato", John Russon highlights the significant contribution of phenomenology to the description of concrete lived experiences and undertakes to show that some important aspects of the phenomenological method can be found in the writings of Aristotle and Plato. Russon argues that Aristotle's texts highlight a commitment to the study of concrete experience similar to the one exhibited by phenomenology. From there, he proceeds to show that Socratic questioning, as presented in Plato's dialogues, can be understood as an invitation to remain committed to concrete experience and as a call for existential change. According to Russon, Socrates lures his interlocutors into providing a phenomenological description of themselves which proves to be irreducible to the reproduction of words, and points to one's own way of being comporting toward the world. Through Socratic dialogue, the interlocutors learn that what they take as "objectively" valid beliefs are, in truth, subjective dispositions. Russon concludes that Socratic questioning is an invitation to own up to our decisions; that is to say, an invitation to be authentic.

Mahon O'Brien's paper, "Irigaray and Plato – Unlikely Bedfellows", takes its impetus from Luce Irigaray's confrontation with the phenomenological tradition on issues such as sexual difference, corporeality and relationality. Irigaray, O'Brien suggests, links phenomenology's blindness toward sexual difference to a sedimented anti-corporealism that has corrupted Western thinking since the time of Plato. In his paper, O'Brien attempts to challenge the well-established narrative that holds Plato responsible for the anti-corporealism of the Western tradition. In particular, he follows Stanley Rosen's provocative portrayal of Socrates in the *Symposium*, in order to argue that Plato's dialogue can be read as an implicit critique of the un-erotic and anti-corporeal elements of Socratic philosophy. If we read certain dialogues (e.g. the *Symposium* and *Phaedo*) in this light, O'Brien suggests, we might find more intersections between Irigaray and Plato than the former would concede. Despite its seeming boldness, O'Brien's argument boils down to the moderate position that Plato can be read as an outlier to a tradition that he is usually seen as having initiated. This means that by re-evaluating our approach to Plato, we can shed light on unrealized possibilities in his work.

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