

The Unconscious in Phenomenology

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Abstract and Keywords

The expression “phenomenology of the unconscious” seems to have an undoubted oxymoronic quality. In phenomenology, the concept of a phenomenon is strictly concerned with consciousness and with its transcendental structure. Nevertheless, there exists in phenomenology, and especially from Husserl onwards, a strong sensitivity to the passive, receptive, affective dimension, understood as a dark, confused dimension, not lit up by the intentional ray. On the other hand, the profoundly epistemological character of Husserl’s phenomenology does not seem to allow for an absolute unconscious. Insofar as it is submerged in an abyss, the unconscious is in fact always a “thing” of consciousness. The transformation of phenomenological gnoseology into phenomenological ontology, the profound revisiting of the notion of temporal flow, the emergence of the theme of the impersonal in Merleau-Ponty, and that of otherness in Ricoeur grants us more radical tools with which to sound that “dark depth” from which phenomenology starts out.

Keywords: Phenomenology, intentionality, passivity, affection, temporal flux, retention, reawakening, flesh, memory, alterity

Phenomenology and the Objectifying Attitude

THE word “phenomenology” is linked to the metaphor of light. Almost all its notions imply a shedding of light onto something: phenomenon, manifestation, evidence, clarity, distinction, perspective, part, datum, essence. In phenomenology we also speak of interior gaze, of intentional putting into focus, of attentional ray, of intuitive replenishment. Seeing is always seeing something. And seeing something means enclosing, limiting in relation to a background. Viewing also has the task of abstracting: abstraction isolates and, hence, illuminates certain properties, putting others into the shade. In Husserl’s phenomenology, the concept which expresses better than any other this “irradiating” of consciousness is intentionality (Husserl 1900–1). Any phenomenon is always related to a state of consciousness; no objects exist that are not in the cone of light of an intentional *Erlebnis*. So Husserl proposes an objectifying attitude, “the Ego is, in an eminent sense,

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directed toward the objectively given, is abandoned to what is objective” (Husserl 1912–1929: 12). This thesis, which indicates an undiscussed priority of the theoretical attitude, is moderated by the acknowledgment of the fact, fundamental for introducing a possible phenomenology of the unconscious, that the objectifying attitude is founded on a terrain of passivity, pre-categoriality, pre-giveness, a terrain which Husserl does not hesitate to call “confused.”

Every spontaneous act, after being performed, necessarily passes over into a confused state; the spontaneity, or if you will, the activity, to speak of it more properly, passes into a passivity, although of such a kind that (. . .) it refers back to the originally spontaneous and articulated performance. This reference back is characterized as such by the I-can or the faculty, which evidently belongs to it, to “reactivate” this state (Husserl 1912–1929: 13–14).

And yet, for Husserl, there exists the possibility of “reactivating” the “non-objectifying” (implicit, tacit, passive) dimension, that same dimension which will later become central in the Heideggerian notion of Dasein, rendering it objectifying (explicit, manifest, active), thanks to a modification of the attitude which renders possible the continuous (p. 317) interpenetration of the two spheres. This means interpreting non-objectifying acts as potentially convertible into objectifying acts. Thus, the theoretical object “reveals” its passivity and, on the other hand, the stratum of passivity (confused, indeterminate) always has the possibility of passing over into its active double. Something similar occurs in the distinction, fundamental in phenomenology, between *actuality* and *inactuality* [*Inaktualität*] or, if we wish, between object and background. In this case, too, as in that of the distinction between passivity and activity, the possibility is revealed of one dimension pouring into the other.

It is the essence of a waking Ego’s stream of mental processes that the continuously unbroken chain of cogitations is continually surrounded by a medium of non-actionality which is always ready to change into the mode of actionality just as, conversely, actionality is always ready to change into non-actionality (Husserl 1912–1929: 72–73).

The distinction between passivity and activity on the one hand and between actuality and inactuality on the other offers us two types of consideration. The first is that consciousness never consists solely in activity or solely in actuality.

It is likewise obviously true of all such mental processes that the actional ones are surrounded by a “halo” of non-actional mental processes (Husserl 1912–1929: 72).

The second consideration is that every state of passive or inactual consciousness can always, as an essential law, re-emerge into activity or actuality; and hence can re-enter the grasp of the “awakened Ego.” Passivity, or inactuality, as *modifications* of activity and actuality, are derived from and subordinate to the latter pair. The priority of attention, putting into focus, the Ego’s grasp on the tacit horizon, once again confirms the priority of light over darkness.

The Dark Dimension of Subjectivity: The Phenomenon of Retention

The general question which must be addressed is whether phenomenology is capable of conceiving and making functional a more substantial and incompatible darkness. Because this happens it is necessary for the phenomenological description to allow for the possibility of being free from the “grasp” of an “awakened,” vigilant, present “I.” That is, an “I” for whom the world opens up as his or her *own* world, and for whom what is hidden, or vague, or inaccessible becomes such in that it is located on the horizon of what the gaze actually “seizes.” The word horizon is significant because it implies the centrality of the notion of *representation* at the expense of the notion of *immersion*. Speaking of requires addressing the problem by using a register that is no longer static and spatial (passivity as pre-categorical; inactuality as background, or halo) but dynamic and temporal. Immersion in fact implies a continuous slippage of the present into the just-been and, for this reason, a continuous difficulty of perceptual “grasp.” From this point of view, the continually interpenetrating and mediating relationship between impression and retention renders ungraspable the “now-point” of consciousness. Thus, the lapse of time renders consciousness opaque, posing the problem of a possible unconscious dimension in the very heart of phenomenology (i.e. the temporal flow of consciousness). In fact, within consciousness itself, the lapse of time shows a point of opacity in the intersection between impression and retention, (p. 318) a threshold in which the impression fades, making itself available for the acceptance of unconscious or, rather, “anonymous” contents. However, the fact remains that, for Husserl, the pre-reflective dimension can only be spoken of in reference to consciousness; which means presupposing once again the centrality and solidity of the intentional structure and the “awakened I.” (Husserl 1912–1929, 1913). If, from the phenomenological point of view, consciousness is *everything*, and if it is true that nothing escapes consciousness (nothing of the world and nothing of oneself, temporal form constitutes the display of consciousness itself. The problem is that in this *everything* which unfolds temporally (according to a structure with a retentional perspective, a primary impression and a protentional perspective) a dimension is introduced which is not “present” to consciousness, and which therefore in some way escapes it. In open contrast, it would seem, with the thesis many times reiterated by Husserl, that “everything which we call *object*, of which we speak, which we confront as actuality which we hold as possible or probable, no matter how indeterminately we think it, is precisely therefore already an object of consciousness” (Husserl 1912–1929: 322). The dimension which flees the “radiation” of consciousness is that of affection. This, connected to the *retentional* element, refers to “the entire realm of associations and habits” (Husserl 1912–1929: 233). This realm includes “sensibility, what imposes itself, the pre-given, the driven in the sphere of passivity. What is specific therein is motivated in the obscure background” (Husserl 1912–1929: 234).¹

What Husserl calls “the case of zero degree affection” (Fuchs 2000; Heller-Roazen 2007) presents implicit motivations, associations, and habits proper to sensibility and impulse, not immediately susceptible to a rational grasp or to irradiation by the awakened con-

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consciousness. Nevertheless, in *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis* (Husserl 1920–1926; Lohmar 1998), Husserl explicitly declares the possibility of an “intentional capture” even of this silent dimension, by means of the phenomenon of so-called *reawakening*, from which the attempt to realize a “phenomenology of the unconscious” (Bernet 1996, 2003; Depraz 2013; Lohmar and Brudzińska 2012). Freud’s thesis, according to which unconscious dream formations do not acknowledge the rules of logic and temporal coherence, and hence constitute a dimension wholly independent of consciousness, is completely denied by Husserl, for whom the unconscious is always mediated by intentional consciousness. The phenomenological deformation of the Freudian notion therefore resides in the inevitability of a reflexive grasp even of those experiences which, on first consideration, seem to be marked by immersion in a complete passivity. The primacy of the passive synthetic constitutions “fills” the space of an “unconscious of consciousness” which forms part of the temporal structure of consciousness: that is, the place in which consciousness becomes opaque and resides in the impression of retention being diminished, in its becoming obscure and plunging into indistinctness. This “diminution” of the impression of retention is also a matter of consciousness. The “lived unconscious” is always mediated by reflection, and the passive, anonymous consciousness is always susceptible of being explicated by the awakened I. Retentions, considered in themselves, are not intentional.

(p. 319) In fact, in restraining the perceptual present, making it slip into the “just-been” before sinking into the more distant horizon of consciousness, they do not offer a genuine “past.” The only act capable of offering the past in its true sense is remembering, which, by means of the phenomenon of associative reawakening, permits the retentions sunk in the past to “reawaken,” making them emerge intentionally. Therefore, the retentions, becoming ever more distant, continue to subsist as a passive stratum of consciousness, and in a certain sense independently of conscious “grasp”; though the fact remains that this grasp is always free to reactivate the sunken retentions by means of association, making them emerge as “past” through the phenomenon of reawakening. The reactivation of the retentive flow brings the now “past” object back to the actuality of consciousness, giving it back its “sense”: an object as an object (*ein Gegenstand als Gegenstand*) gives itself uniquely for use by an active consciousness, and the passive contents must, if they are not to vanish in the unity of consciousness, avoid the retentive sinking into an unconscious that is, so to speak, absolute. In this sense, affection will never be pure passivity, but always passivity energized by some activity, and the reawakening through memory takes on the appearance of a reflexive revolution with respect to a pre-constituted whole, one therefore predisposed to emerge from the darkness of passivity into the light of activity. Through the phenomenon of reawakening, the unconscious thus becomes, to all intents and purposes, a lived experience of my own. Therefore, it is not only the activity of consciousness which is rooted in passivity, but passivity is already in turn predisposed to activity: that is, to rationality. Husserl’s phenomenology of the unconscious brings it back into the domain of the analytic of consciousness. In this schema, everything is directly to the emergence of givenness and to the transparency of consciousness. The unconscious, for all that it is *sunken*, is the “thing” of consciousness.

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The conception of the unconscious as strictly anchored to the priority of the impression and to the primary consciousness of the now-point is noted by Michel Henry as one of the most critical points in Husserl's phenomenology. The process in which the now-point, and the impression given in it, change constantly into the past in an uninterrupted slippage, "this continual sinking of being into the abyss of a nothingness that continually opens up below it is what gives Husserlian description its fascinating, even hallucinatory character, as well as its incoherence and absurdity" (1990: 30). This incoherence and absurdity resides in reading the continuum of consciousness as an incoherent passage between being and nothing, which has the task of guaranteeing the return to being and its continuous outpouring into an always new now-point that is destined to fall constantly into an ever deeper past. Now, this movement leaves phenomenological description "stumbling like a drunken man," since "one who stands on the crest of the now not only has one foot on the ground and the other in the void but is also continually falling from the ground and into the void" (Henry 1990: 30), thereby rendering this very continuum of consciousness broken and constantly interrupted. The predominance of the primary consciousness of the now thus deprives impression of its function as a *donation*. In fact, affectivity is not the keystone, but the result, the hinge. And it is not the slipping and sinking of the now-point that is grasped by retention, but that "longitudinal intentionality" (Henry 1990: 28) which runs along the whole flow, giving it continuity. Restoring the experience of the past, the just-been, to a primary consciousness entails a considerable shift in the standpoint of phenomenology toward the unconscious. The unconscious is no longer the present incessantly sinking into the past, but the past which incessantly maintains the present.

(p. 320) It Is Felt in Us: The Impersonal in the Flesh

In Husserl's phenomenology, essentially tied to the present of consciousness, the concept of the unconscious is assimilated into the non-conscious: that is, into what is simply no longer present. Husserl's first preoccupation is to guarantee the "offered-ness" of the perceptual present. Retention itself displays a present in the form of the just-been and not a genuine past. The past to which Husserl refers is always relative to the capacity of the awakened consciousness to illuminate parts of the world and of consciousness itself, mediating that "activity of overview," that attitude to reflective distance which Merleau-Ponty sees as the essential hallmark of Husserlian phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1945; Behnke 2002). This is a conception which foregrounds cognitive activities at the expense of ontological ones, representation at the expense of being. According to Merleau-Ponty, the re-designation of the past as such, is revealed in the ontological dimension of phenomenology. It is, in fact, in the notion of incarnation and of *en-être* that Merleau-Ponty discovers the deep reasons of Freudianism. From its very beginnings, phenomenology has been founded on a paradox: on the one hand the subject is *in the world* but not only *of the world*; on the other hand, it is conscious of the world while at the same playing a part in it. All this is translated into the concept of *en-être*; not disembodied consciousness, but organic matter, flesh, *res viva*. In contradiction to Husserl, the visible is not "in front of"

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the subject, but is “an encompassing, lateral investment, *flesh*” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 217). Being surrounds, absorbs, passes through the subject. Flesh, as “interiorly worked-over mass” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 147), thus becomes the ontological characterization of Being and of its many-layered, multifaceted nature, of which the body is one variant. The subject is neither consciousness nor mere intentionality, but “the massive unity of Being . . . , it is the wild, non-refined, vertical Being” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 202–203), which renders me visible and the things seen: “since vision is a palpation with the look, it must also be inscribed in the order of being that it discloses to us; he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 134). In this sense, being is *reversibility*, that same reversibility which we experience in the example of the two hands touching each other; which is never coincidence because there is always a gap that is irremediably hidden from me: that is, the *between* of my flesh and the flesh of the world. The subject is enveloped by the world; the world passes through the subject. The visible is always previously structured by the invisible, identity by difference. The invisible is not that which excluded by the visible, but is that which is intrinsic to the visible: every visible is also invisible. The invisible is the *Urpräsentation* of the *Nichturpräsentierbar* (originating presentation of the unrepresentable); it is a *cavity* of the visible, one of its *folds*, its *reverse side*; “it is pure transcendence without an ontic mask” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 229).

In this powerful reprise of the ontological theme, which constitutes an unmasking of gnoseological conceptions taken for granted, the fleshly subject is the correlative of a pre-egological subject; the subject, as a synthesis of visible and invisible, is “a Self-presence that is not an *absence from oneself*, a contact with Self *through* the divergence (*écart*) with regard to Self” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 192), an opening to the world before it is a representation of the world. Psychoanalysis and ontology are united in thinking about the incarnation and initiation of the subject: in Merleau-Ponty, as in Freud, “with the first vision, (p. 321) the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 151). In this pre-objective and pre-egological dimension, composed of non-representational acts (since they do not give objects, and are *fungierende*) (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 238), “inside Being,” the unconscious is located. In this sense, phenomenology can loosen the conceptual crystallizations of psychoanalysis: the unconscious, exceeding any naturalistic configuration, its rootedness in the world and openness to the world. To a psychological psychoanalysis which considers the Ego as an autonomous function and presents an objectifying conception of reality, Merleau-Ponty, by reclaiming Lacan, counterpoises an ontological re-reading of Freud. What Lacan criticizes is in fact the illusion of the datum of perception as such and the definition of the subject as the site of the unity of experience. The subject is in fact, before all else, *acted*; not activity but, first of all, passivity. Thinking about “an ontological psychoanalysis” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 270) means going beyond a naturalistic and causal conception of psychic life, but also avoids flattening it onto a “humanistic” and “existential” dimension. In the dimension of concrete ontology, psychoanalysis takes on the role of

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deconstructing the head-to-head contraposition between subject and object in favor of the auscultation of that atemporal and indestructible dimension in us that is the unconscious; an unconscious which is not here reduced to a psychology of events and of unconscious psychic realities, but read as the reversible, the reverse side of consciousness; that primary experience of absence which only a phenomenology that descends “into its own sub-soil” can glimpse, and which Lacan has called our “mooring to being.” For Merleau-Ponty, therefore, the unconscious is not a totality of primary instincts which burst into consciousness, nor a place in which repressed representations dwell, but the “censored chapter” of the subject’s history, the truth of which is written elsewhere: in the body, in impenetrable memories, in distortions, and so on. The unconscious is the invisible which gives our history and our experience the visible form that it has; that which organizes our experience without positively giving itself. The relationship between consciousness and unconscious is not therefore a relationship between two realities, but a relation between the presence and absence of the same reality; an absence which, for this very reason, is not a nothingness.

The constant use of the impersonal form (“is thought in me,” “is perceived in me,” etc.) indicates a new openness of phenomenology to an ontology of the transindividual or of the intercorporeal; indeed, sensation’s “origin is anterior to myself, it arises from *sensibility* which has preceded it and will outlive it, just as my birth and death belong to a natality and a mortality which are anonymous” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 250–251). The subject, as Lacan says, *is spoken*. Our whole experience is inserted, therefore, into a general flux which flows inside me without my being the cause of it. Conceiving of perception not as a personal act but as an impersonal fabric in which other beings are no more than “variations of ourselves,” radically changes the phenomenological perspective. From being personal, this perspective makes itself impersonal, from solipsistic it becomes relational: all beings are reciprocally constituted out of a common flesh, out of matter which is *in itself* expressive. This once again underlines the rooting in the world, situated existence, *être au monde*.

(p. 322) Archaeology of the Self

According to Ricoeur (1965, 1990), the great merit of psychoanalysis consists in the attempt to insert identity into the crack between conscious and psychic. Beyond the intentional and voluntary dimension, there is a primary experience which includes the “I” that I desire, the “I” that I live, and existence in general as body. Freud suggested calling latent acts pre-conscious, provisionally unconscious but disposed to becoming conscious. It is the repressed processes which are properly unconscious and cannot become conscious unless mediated: that is, by means of representations which stand in for them. For Freud, we can therefore speak of an unconscious only if we encounter a repression which does not suppress or negate a drive, but prevents its becoming conscious. For Ricoeur, the unconscious in Husserl is in reality identifiable with the pre-conscious of psychoanalysis.

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An authentic phenomenology of the unconscious cannot dispense with the question of memory. To the enigmatic question *whose is the memory?* Ricoeur offers an equally enigmatic reply: *memory is of the past*. We can speak about the past in two ways: in the sense of *Vergangenheit*: that is, as that which is no longer, or which has disappeared because of the corrupting and destructive power of time; but also in the sense of the *Gewesen*, as *having-been*. In this second sense, the past indicates the anteriority of being in a positive form, an absence not guaranteed by memory but nonetheless susceptible to being evoked by it. We say that the past *is no longer there*; but we also say that *the past has been*: with the first expression we underline its disappearance, its absence in respect of our possibility of acting upon it; with the second we instead underline its full anteriority with respect to any forgotten or remembered event. According to Ricoeur, it is a grammatical error to make the past into a noun, treating it as a place, or as a storehouse in which lived experiences would be deposited after they have passed. In this sense, the metaphor of the imprint of a seal on wax, often used in speaking of memory, reinforces the idea of a recollection as localized, as if it could be gathered and stored somewhere, in a place which might preserve it and from where can be extracted so as to evoke it, recalling it to memory. In fact, there exists a deep and unrememberable *having-been past*, a *Gewesenheit* which Ricoeur compares to the Freudian Unconscious, something so forgotten that it can never be conscious.

Time, as a desire to be and an effort to exist, as a vital fact in which the “patchiness” of the psyche or of consciousness plays a part, enables the conversion of traditional science into hermeneutic science, as indeed psychoanalysis is configured to be, through which the subject’s psyche-soma withdraws from any attempt at deterministic description. For Ricoeur, the truest essence of the psychic resides in the concept of incommunicable otherness, in which it is *becoming conscious* that reproduces the meaning of consciousness itself. In this sense, Ricoeur attributes to Freud the great theoretical responsibility for an overturned *epoché*, which has the purpose of treating as a whole that which is other in relation to consciousness itself: beyond intentionality there exists an unconscious thought, a lacuna, an anteriority of the drive over volition. The dimension of beyondness and otherness which characterizes consciousness, which in Kant resides in the limit, which cannot be crossed, of the noumenon, is now located in the very heart of the subject as its own most intimate self.

This is the basis on which is founded the distinction, present in both Husserl and Freud, between representation [*Vorstellung*] and psychic representing [*Vorstellungrepräsentanz*]. The latter, concerning the receptive side of the Ego, its constitutive passivity, tells us that (p. 323) responsibility for meaning goes far beyond conscious intentionality, since it is rooted in the drive-work of the unconscious in the recognition of that energetic thrust rooted in the subject and at the same time other than it. Freud claims that the instinct per se is unknowable, and enters the psychic field by means of indices of representation. So, the point at which meaning and force coincide must be identified not in conscious representations but in representations of the instinct; that is, what Ricoeur calls a quasi-language. The notion of representation emphasizes the fact that responsibility for mean-

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ing also belongs to the instinctual work of the unconscious, to its primeval energetic thrust.

Consciousness, far from being the first and absolute source, receives and produces its meanings from the starting point of an energetic and vital dimension which is largely endured. One of the great outcomes of psychoanalysis is that the Ego is not the instinct's *origin*, but its *goal*, and that consciousness is not so much that which posits something as a becoming conscious of something, starting from a "dark depth"; that same dark depth which phenomenology itself takes as its starting point.

Freud and Ricoeur are moved by the same impulse: that of bringing the activity of the Ego back to its root in the drive and in the body, a root in which the conflict between the components of the psyche is primary and can never be definitively resolved. But with a substantial difference. For Ricoeur, the unconscious cannot be substantivized: reduced, that is, to a mere cause of which consciousness would simply constitute the effect. If that were the way things are, the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious would inevitably be lost and, with it, the therapeutic relationship. What interests Ricoeur is the path back to the negative character of the unconscious. In fact, for him, a decisive factor in treatment is an extension of the field of consciousness by means of the continuous integration of the unconscious resources which as a consequence releases the affects from their contracted state.

Thanks to this "unrememberable" we draw on the mythic depth, that same background which gives memory the resource with which to combat oblivion. From this dark and subterranean spring emerge both the oblivion of erasure and the energy that is made available for the work of memory. We can in fact think of memory as an active, living force. But to do this, we need to acknowledge that memory is not only concerned with the past, but also with the present and the future. The future reverberates in the past, and the past, moving into the present, gives the future its direction. This perspective, dispensing with the retrospective illusion of fatality, is capable of modifying the weight of the past by passing beyond the irreversible having-been of events. Thus, guilt, the precondition not maintained, the evil perpetrated or suffered, are not mere boulders which the past loads onto the shoulders of the present and the future. Forgiveness, the fulfillment of responsibilities, the remedy for an evil, in fact offer the possibility of "reopening" the past and of changing its meaning, thereby re-clarifying the future. Furthermore, the future, once blocked, retroactively modifies the past, understood as a compulsion to repeat, unreflective habit, action motivated by painful, repressed memories. This renewal of the past is what permits cure.

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Notes:

(¹) The reference to psychoanalysis is explicit here: “The ‘motives’ ” are often deeply buried but can be brought to light by ‘psychoanalysis.’ A thought ‘reminds’ me of other thoughts and calls back into memory a past lived experience, etc. In some cases it can be perceived. In most cases, however, the motivation is indeed actually present in consciousness, but it does not stand out; it is unnoticed or unnoticeable (‘unconscious’)” (Husserl 1912–1929: 234).

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