

MERLEAU-PONTY'S ONTOLOGY OF THE LEBENSWELT

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Part I. The Problem

After years of programmatic revision and an increasing awareness of the tragic political situation which was taking hold of Europe in the 1930's, Edmund Husserl focused his investigations on the Lebenswelt.¹ Husserl saw that a dangerous "Crisis" of reason was developing not only in the socio-political sphere, but also in the scientific community of his time. The status of reason was again considered problematic and, consequently, subjectivism, relativism and nihilism demanded center stage. Husserl thrust himself headlong into the challenge of saving the integrity of reason and episteme.

However, Husserl took an idealist position to attempt a solution. He turned to a Kantian "philosophy of consciousness", where truth resides in the "inner man".² This move disappointed some of the students of Husserl's phenomenology because they felt that this idealistic position represented an inauthentic or pseudo-solution for the problem of reason. Later, French phenomenologists such as Pierre Thevanaz claimed that an appropriate approach should take the form of an ontology of the Lebenswelt which would provide a more "object-centered" description. If subjectivism and relativism block the way to a renewed and justified faith in rationality, then locating truth conditions primarily in the subject is not the way to remove those obstacles. It is true that Husserl, himself, entertained the possibility of an ontological as opposed to an egological description of the Lebenswelt.³ But, it is also true that Husserl rejects that alternative to return to his Kantian framework. Therefore, Husserl does not settle the issue of the "Crisis" with an adequate description of the Lebenswelt, but because of his one-sided approach he leaves us with the problem and, perhaps, even adds to the confusion.

Part II. Merleau-Ponty's Ontology of the Lebenswelt:

An Overcoming of the "Crisis"

Maurice Merleau-Ponty began his philosophical itinerary in the shadow of Husserl and became one of the greatest phenomenologists. This itinerary was to lead him to a critical point when phenomenology and philosophy would become increasingly questionable to him. When Merleau-Ponty's life was abruptly interrupted in 1961, he was just in the process of finding a way to overcome the crisis of philosophy.⁴

By now it is well known that Maurice Merleau-Ponty (March 14, 1908-May 3, 1961) was one of the more important students of Husserl's phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty thought that Husserl's intentions concerning

the Lebenswelt were good and that Husserl has pointed the way to a region where a solution for the "Crisis" was possible. In fact, Merleau-Ponty was so impressed with Husserl's work in this area that he was one of the first visitors at the Husserl Archives to study the then unpublished Krisis manuscripts.

Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty found the problem which was already mentioned in reference to Thévanaz: to locate the truth in the inner world of the subject reduced lived-experience to a one-sided idealism. This only added to the subjective, relative kinds of analysis which Husserl wished to avoid. But, in contrast to the proposal of Thevanaz concerning a more "object-centered" approach, Merleau-Ponty thought that if Husserl's philosophy of consciousness "flew us over" the Lebenswelt, then a one-sided "object-centered" analysis would dig us under the Lebenswelt. This only adds to the objective or naturalistic approaches of the "scientism" which Husserl also wished to avoid. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty attempted to develop an authentic, multi-dimensional description of the Lebenswelt; one which would take us directly into the realm of our lived-experience and would not neglect any of its ontological features. But, we must still ask whether Merleau-Ponty succeeded where others had failed. In short, is it possible to say something about the Lebenswelt without falling into the reductionisms which constitute the "Crisis" itself?

I propose that Merleau-Ponty's last and unfinished book, The Visible and the Invisible, marks a successful and authentic thrust into the Lebenswelt. Indeed, I claim that this book represents one massive phenomenological reduction which attempts to bracket itself in order to reach a primordial contact with the world of lived-experience. Clearly, then, Merleau-Ponty is still involved with reductions. But there are differences between his type of reductions and those employed by Husserl. One of the major differences lies in the fact that Husserl assumed a priori that he could find a quasi-Cartesian certainty upon which the shaky status of reason could be grounded. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, realized the essential incompleteness of our finite attempts to gain unambiguous, apodictic verities. Thus, Merleau-Ponty seems to be more in tune with our lived-experience of finitude and ambiguity. We must look into our experience first, and then report what we find posteriori. Merleau-Ponty checks his experience but does not find the clarity which Husserl yearned to establish. Unfortunately, our relation to the world is a bit more tangled than Husserl fully realized.

Even as we perform the phenomenological reduction to a purified Lebenswelt, the Kulturwelt screens our observations. This does not mean that contact with the Lebenswelt is impossible. Very simply, this means that we have fully realized something new about its ontological constituents; we now have a more adequate ontological description of the Lebenswelt. We note that the world of experience, as-it-is-lived, is an ambiguous mixture of primordial and cultural presuppositions. Our experience is lived in an "interworld" which, dialectically enough, is both primordial and cultural and consequently, is neither of these in an absolute sense. This interworld is the phenomenal field of life as we live it. Even so, does not this imply that we cannot escape our more subjective and culturally relative presuppositions? If this is the

case, then the "Crisis" again raises its monstrous head. How, then, does Merleau-Ponty's description of the Lebenswelt help to avoid the "Crisis"?

The answer points us to Husserl's concept of philosophical "rigor". We now more adequately realize the ontological structure of the Lebenswelt. Now we are aware that the truth is neither subjective nor objective, neither relative nor absolute, neither cultural nor brute. This awareness re-opens the field of inquiry. It helps to avoid dogmatism in any of its forms: scientism, relativism, reductionism, racism, etc. Now we know that we don't know. And perhaps now we will begin again our journey toward truth. We know also that we must look for this truth in a way which will consistently account for lived-experience and which will not contradict it. It is my belief that Merleau-Ponty has delivered us to a realm where interrogation, questioning, critique and intersubjective dialogue is not only made possible but can also serve as a hedge against the "Crisis".

NOTES

1. The concept of the Lebenswelt is not common baggage for all philosophers. Thus, some explication is necessary. This term has a history which has been traced first to Schleiermacher's Erlebnis ("lived-experience") and then to Dilthey's das Leben ("inner life") see H.N. Tuttle, Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of Historical Understanding: A Critical Analysis (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1969), 12-20. These notions were later assimilated into the phenomenological concept of the Lebenswelt. This term marks the general horizon or context of all experience. It is the all-inclusive sphere of our finite, concrete experience which is presupposed by any human activity whatever. This pre-reflective world is given in brute experience and serves as the material for our metaphysical and epistemological articulations. This world is common to all of humanity and is allegedly pre-thematic and pre-cultural. Hence, Husserl believed that this Lebenswelt could, indeed, provide an objective and universal basis for our scientific articulations and worldviews. In short, the Lebenswelt analysis would hopefully avoid the perversions, reductionisms and sicknesses which constitute the "Crisis" in European science and humanity in general.

2. See especially the last paragraph of Husserl's Cartesian Meditations, 157. There he writes:

The Delphic motto, 'Know thyself!' has gained a new significance. Positive science is a science lost in the world. I must lose the world by epoche, in order to regain it by a universal self-examination. 'Do not wish to go out', says Augustine, 'go back into yourself; truth dwells in the inner man'.

3. See Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970), 173-174.

4. Matthieu Casalis, "Merleau-Ponty's Philosophical Itinerary: From Phenomenology to Onto-Semiology" in The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy (February, 1975), 63.