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## Phenomenological Reduction and Radical Situatedness: Merleau-Ponty and the Method of Critical Phenomenology

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Against the background of recent debates around "critical phenomenology", this paper discusses Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the phenomenological method, focusing on the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty traces the distinction between classical and critical phenomenology back to Husserl. He sees the Husserl of the published works as representing a version of phenomenology that is unsuited for critique and advocates for another Husserl that he finds in (at the time) unpublished manuscripts. Merleau-Ponty considers the phenomenological reduction as the key methodological step to break with the taken-for-grantedness of the world and to make manifest the inescapable entanglement of subject and world. He considers this the prerequisite for and path into an analysis and critique of social structures. Merleau-Ponty subscribes to the phenomenological method precisely because he finds it to be the most suitable approach for analysing the works of power in concrete historical movements and to develop a situated critique.

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## 1. The Relation of Critical and Classical Phenomenology

The movement going by the name "critical phenomenology" has become a relevant force at the intersection of phenomenology and critical theory. While leading figures of the movement have emphasized the distinction between classical and critical phenomenology (Salamon 2018; Guenther 2020; 2021), others have contested the adequacy and merits of such a distinction. Rodemeyer, for instance, argues that phenomenology is, by its very definition, already marked "as a critical enterprise": "As a method, it is inherently critical, since it intends to reveal the very foundations of our presumption and to describe how those foundations become part of our everyday experiences." (Rodemeyer 2022, 97) The key question in this debate is how to assess the merits of so-called classical phenomenology for social critique.

This paper is meant as a contribution to this debate, although not directly, but via a reading of a key text of Merleau-Ponty. The core claim of this paper, however, is not even about Merleau-Ponty himself, but rather about Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl. Merleau-Ponty is a crucial reference author for critical phenomenologists and might be considered the border figure between classical and critical phenomenology. Within the movement of critical phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is seen as the first who moved away from Husserl's classical phenomenology and towards a critical phenomenology (Davis 2020, 9), although there is debate to what extent Merleau-Ponty's work does justice to concrete historical phenomena like white supremacy and heteropatriarchy which are the main focus of critical phenomenologists (Guenther 2021, 7).

This paper will not directly engage with these issues but restrict itself to a close reading of the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*. In this short text, Merleau-Ponty traces the distinction between a classical and a critical phenomenology back to Husserl. For him, there is a key tension within Husserl's oeuvre: On the one hand, he sees the Husserl of the published works as representing a version of phenomenology that is unsuited for socio-political critique. On the other hand, he advocates for another Husserl that he found when studying Husserl's at the time unpublished manuscripts. We might say that what Merleau-Ponty identifies as the published Husserl represents the path of classical phenomenology, while the second, at the time unpublished Husserl represents critical phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty subscribes to the phenomenological method precisely because he finds it to be the most suitable approach for analysing the works of power in concrete historical movements and to develop forms of situated critique. In this context, he emphasizes the epoché and reduction – the key methodological tools of classical phenomenology – as key methodological steps that break with the taken-for-grantedness of the world and make manifest the inescapable entanglement of subject and world. Merleau-Ponty considers this the prerequisite for and path into an analysis and critique of social structures.

What I have to say in this paper about Merleau-Ponty's take on Husserl and the phenomenological method is not original, but well-established within newer research on Merleau-Ponty (Smith 2005; Pollard 2018; Kee 2020). However, I do not think that it has received sufficient attention within debates surrounding the movement of critical phenomenology, and thus, I consider it an important contribution to introduce those findings from Merleau-Ponty research into debates about critical phenomenology.

To end this introduction, let me mention another issue that is in the background of this paper, although it can only be addressed in passing. It is often assumed that there is a rift between Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological works like *The Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty 1963) and *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2012) and his political works like *Humanism and Terror* (Merleau-Ponty 1969). By contrast, I subscribe to the view that his more obviously phenomenological works are best seen as laying the groundwork for his more obviously political works (Coole 2003). My reading of *Phenomenology of Perception* draws attention to the overall context of this work and opposes interpretations that focus unilaterally on his phenomenology of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty's investigations of the body and perception are embedded in the overall argumentative arch of *Phenomenology of Perception* which begins with reflections on the phenomenological method and ends with an account of historically situated freedom. *Phenomenology of Perception* is meant to develop understandings of the world, history, and freedom that enable us to make sense of human agency as radically situated and conditioned within a complex field of political forces and, nevertheless, as the driver of history. The end of *Phenomenology of Perception* leads directly into the preface of *Humanism and Terror* in which one can see Merleau-Ponty's political phenomenology in action (Flynn 2007; Melançon 2010). Hence, if one wants to assess if Merleau-Ponty's work does justice to concrete historical phenomena, one needs to explore his many writings on concrete political issues, often first published in *Les Temps Modernes* (which Merleau-Ponty co-edited) and many but by far not all collected in the volumes *Humanism and Terror* (Merleau-Ponty 1969) and *Sense and Non-sense* (Merleau-Ponty 1964). This has been a long-standing topic in circles exploring Merleau-Ponty from a Marxist perspective (Poster 1975; Cooper 1979; Drake 2002), but not within newer debates around critical phenomenology. So again, I content that considering those findings has key merits for the debate about critical phenomenology.

## 2. Defining Critical Phenomenology

In this section, I will review the understanding of critical phenomenology presented in the volume *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Weiss, Murphy, and Salamon 2020). After a brief introduction, *50 Concepts* begins with two chapters that appear to

be meant as stage setters, before the volume continues with the rest of the entries in an alphabetic order. The first chapter is by Duane H. Davis on "The Phenomenological Method", the second by Lisa Guenther on "Critical Phenomenology." These opening chapters suggest a two-folded division of the phenomenological tradition.

First, critical phenomenology is distinguished from classical phenomenology. As Guenther states, "where classical phenomenology remains insufficiently critical is in failing to give an equally rigorous account of how contingent historical and social structures also shape our experience, not just empirically or in a piecemeal fashion, but in what we might call a quasi-transcendental way." (Guenther 2020, 12) Thus, Guenther puts forward the thesis that classical phenomenology is not capable of describing social structures and their impact on our experience and, therefore, is not capable of contributing to their critique. According to Guenther, this has to do with the method that guides classical phenomenology: "We overlook them [the contingent historical and social structures] at our peril, even if our project is transcendental, because they are part of what we must bracket to get into the phenomenological attitude." (Guenther 2020, 12) According to Guenther, it is the phenomenological method of the epoché and the reduction that is responsible for the fact that classical phenomenology is not able to include social structures in its analyses. This is the case because this classical methodology is taken to imply that one must bracket these structures to be able to do phenomenology. From this assumption, Guenther draws the conclusion that classical phenomenology must be combined with other methods to be transformed into a critical phenomenology.

Second, Davis (2020) draws a dividing line between an orthodox variety of phenomenology associated with Husserl and an existential-hermeneutic variety associated with the names of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir, Sartre, and others. Accordingly, he states that the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception* is where Merleau-Ponty "announces his departure from Husserlian phenomenology." (Davis 2020, 9) This distinction is accompanied by the thesis that the existential-hermeneutic variety provides crucial points of contact for a critical phenomenology, while the orthodox variety is to be overcome. Insofar as critical phenomenology refers affirmatively to Husserl, according to Davis, this is only to his remarks on intersubjectivity and to his late work on the lifeworld, while his classical works on the phenomenological method need to be rejected. The architecture of *50 Concepts* appears to follow this assumption. In this context, I find it remarkable that there are no entries on the epoché and the reduction in *50 Concepts*. This suggests that these key methodological tools of Husserlian phenomenology are not considered to be relevant concepts for the development of a critical phenomenology.

This two-folded division is based on an understanding of the phenomenological method that is widespread, as I will show in the next section. Such an interpretation is particularly powerful in how other traditions see phenomenology. But, as the example of critical phenomenology shows, such a view is also present within movements that see themselves as belonging to the phenomenological tradition. As I will show in later sections, Merleau-Ponty argued that such a view captures the traditional phenomenological methodology, as it was introduced by Husserl, only in a one-sided way. The preface of *Phenomenology of Perception* precisely serves the purpose of challenging such a one-sided interpretation of Husserl. Therefore, a careful reading of the preface also challenges the assumption that Merleau-Ponty moved away from a (supposedly idealistic) Husserlian phenomenology towards a Heideggerian existential-hermeneutic phenomenology. We will see instead that Merleau-Ponty locates this distinction within Husserl's work, namely as a tension between two versions of Husserl's methodology.

For the movement of critical phenomenology, a one-sided understanding of the method of so-called classical phenomenology is problematic because, if taken at face value, it forecloses investigating classical reflections on the phenomenological method to find potential contributions to phenomenology as a critical enterprise. If it were the case that core elements of the traditional phenomenological method like the epoché and the reduction prevent the analysis of social structures, then it would indeed be the case that classical phenomenology could at best provide selected concepts for a description of experiences of, e.g., oppression, while the methods for an analysis and critique of underlying social structures would need to be taken from other traditions. If that were the case, however, then a question would arise that challenges the core tenet of the project of a critical phenomenology: What is the added value of a critical *phenomenology* for the project of critique? If some selected concepts were all that phenomenology had to offer in this context, wouldn't it be better to subscribe to Frankfurt school critical theory, Foucauldian style discourse analysis, deconstructivist queer theory, or another critical methodology of one's choice, rather than messing around with phenomenology?

In my view, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the phenomenological method are particularly suited to address this challenge. Because for Merleau-Ponty, the traditional phenomenological methodology, as it was developed by Husserl and Heidegger, is the prerequisite for the analysis and critique of social structures. But before addressing Merleau-Ponty directly, let me prepare the discussion with some remarks on the epoché and the reduction.

### 3. Classical Views of the Phenomenology Reduction

A common criticism of Husserl is directed against his supposed idealism and subject-centeredness, which are both seen as equally problematic. These two charges are usually tied to his method which centers around the epoché and the reduction. As an example of this widespread interpretation, consider the following statement by Taylor Carman:

The transcendental reduction [...] consists in methodically turning away from everything external to consciousness and focusing instead on what is internal to it. The reduction thus amounts to a special kind of reflection in which the ordinary objects of our intentional attitudes drop out of sight, while the immanent contents of those attitudes become the new objects of our attention. (Carman 2003, 80)

According to Carman, the phenomenological reduction leads to a turning away from the outer world towards the inner content of consciousness. As a consequence, only this immanent sphere of consciousness is the object of phenomenological investigation. If this interpretation of the phenomenological reduction were true, then Husserl would indeed be an idealist of the worst kind.

It is probably based on such an understanding of the phenomenological reduction that some interpreters like Davis (2020, 9) assume that *Phenomenology of Perception* should be read as showing that Merleau-Ponty departed from Husserlian phenomenology and replaced it by Heidegger's analysis of being-in-the-world (Priest 1998, 38). Smith (2005) reconstructs two reasons for such an assessment of Merleau-Ponty's relation to Husserl and Heidegger: First, it is assumed that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of man as "being toward the world" (*est au monde*) – which is Merleau-Ponty's translation of Heidegger's "Being-in-the-world" into French – is incompatible with the phenomenological reduction. Second, Merleau-Ponty's detailed references to the empirical sciences, especially to Gestalt psychology, are assumed to be incompatibly with Husserl's transcendental approach. This view on the phenomenological reduction and its implications for understanding the relation of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl is clearly exemplified in the quotation from Taylor Carman. Regarding current representatives of critical phenomenology, the suspicion arises that they might also be influenced by such an understanding of the phenomenological reduction, which leads them to a similar conclusion regarding the relation of Merleau-Ponty and Husserl.

In contrast to this traditional view on Merleau-Ponty's relation to Husserl, recent research on Merleau-Ponty points out that he does not reject the phenomenological reduction at all, but accepts it as a fundamental methodological principle; admittedly

not the idealist interpretation just outlined, but what he considers to be the appropriate understanding of Husserl's reduction (Smith 2005; Pollard 2018; Kee 2020). Merleau-Ponty is very explicit about not seeing himself as a critic of Husserl. On the contrary, he points out that his own interpretation of the reduction is based on his reading of Husserl's later research manuscripts (Kee 2020, 19). To the extent that he criticizes Husserl's approach, it is only a specific, idealist (self-)interpretation of Husserl against which he makes a strong case for a different understanding which is also found in Husserl's work. Thus, Merleau-Ponty considers it wrong to frame the opposition between a subject-centered, idealist interpretation of phenomenology and an existential-hermeneutic interpretation of phenomenology as an opposition between Husserl, on the one hand, and Heidegger and himself on the other. Rather, Merleau-Ponty understands those alternatives as two competing interpretations of Husserl.

#### 4. A Better View on the Phenomenological Reduction

What is Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the phenomenological reduction? The preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, which will be discussed in the following section, provides a detailed answer to this question. To prepare this discussion, let me add some general remarks on a better understanding of the epoché and the reduction than the one presented in the previous section.

To begin with, we need to understand what the epoché and the reduction are directed against. They are directed against the so-called *natural attitude*. Husserl calls the natural attitude the thesis according to which we normally, in our ordinary engagement with the world, take the established shape of the world as given. The phenomenological method turns against this naive belief in the current shape of the world. In this context "the epoché is the term for our abrupt suspension of a naive metaphysical attitude [...]. In contrast, the *reduction* is the term for our thematization of the correlation between subjectivity and world." (Zahavi 2002, 46) In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty does not draw a line between the epoché and the reduction, but only speaks about the reduction. As a matter of simplification, I will follow him in only naming the reduction for the remainder of this paper. However, using 'reduction' in such a way refers to the entire methodological step of suspending the natural attitude and thematizing the correlation of subjectivity and world. It is important to note that the purpose of bracketing the natural attitude is not to turn us away from the world and towards consciousness. Rather, the purpose is precisely to make the structures of the world accessible for description. This is easier to understand if we take into account that the phenomenological method, in addition to bracketing the natural attitude, is directed above all against the *objective attitude* of a science that understands itself as

positivistic. Merleau-Ponty writes accordingly that the phenomenological method "is first and foremost the disavowal of science." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxi) Merleau-Ponty does not understand this as a dismissal of all the sciences, but of a positivistic explanatory model of the sciences. The phenomenological method is a specific way of relating oneself to the *natural attitude* predominant in the lifeworld and to the *objective attitude* of positivistic sciences.

Building on classical phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, but also Gadamer, Linda Alcoff (2006, 94) reformulates the distinction between the natural, the objective, and the phenomenological attitudes as three distinct forms of knowledge (Alcoff 2006, 94): First, the *natural attitude* concerns lifeworld knowledge that is key to handling our everyday lives. What she refers to here is the know-how that enables us to go about our daily business. Second, the *objective attitude* refers to scientific knowledge in propositional form (know that), i.e., knowledge about the nature of the universe that is largely decoupled from our everyday concerns. Phenomenology is concerned with a *third form of knowledge*: To achieve this knowledge, we must neither naively go along with lifeworld practices (natural attitude) nor leapfrog it into a sphere of objective knowledge (objective attitude). Rather, we must reflexively accompany lifeworld practices in order to make their underlying structures accessible to description. The phenomenological reduction serves the purpose of achieving this third form of knowledge. It is a form of knowledge that concerns the world with which we deal in our everyday practices. But it does not simply describe what is going on in this world. Rather, it aims to make manifest the underlying structures which make it the case that the world is the way it is. If we start from such an understanding of the phenomenological reduction, then it becomes apparent that the phenomenological method is not only not opposed to the critique of social structures, but rather, can be seen as crucial for enabling it.

Such an understanding of the phenomenological reduction suggests that the program which *50 Concepts* formulates for a critical phenomenology has been the research program of phenomenology all along. In other words, the methodology of classical phenomenology lends full support to an analysis and critique of social structures. In her entry on "Critical Phenomenology", Guenther adds two additional features of a critical in contrast to classical phenomenology. The first is an emphasis on the historical emergence of social structures:

As a philosophical practice, critical phenomenology suspends commonsense accounts of reality in order to map and describe the structures that make these accounts possible, to analyze the way they function, and to open up new possibilities



for reimagining and reclaiming the commons. It is a way of pulling up traces of a history that is not quite or no longer there—that has been rubbed out or consigned to invisibility—but still shapes the emergence of meaning. (Guenther 2020, 15)

Second, critical phenomenology involves an activist orientation towards not only analyzing, but also changing the world:

Critical phenomenology goes beyond classical phenomenology by reflecting on the quasi-transcendental social structures that make our experience of the world possible and meaningful, and also by engaging in a material practice of 'restructuring the world' in order to generate new and liberatory possibilities for meaningful experience and existence. In this sense, critical phenomenology is both a way of doing philosophy and a way of approaching political activism. (Guenther 2020, 15)

While I agree that Husserl's work pays neither close attention to concrete movements of power in specific historical circumstances nor offers a transformative orientation, I would argue that this is precisely the aim of Merleau-Ponty's work, at least in the period immediately following World War Two. If we read texts like "The War Has Taken Place" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 139–52), Merleau-Ponty's programmatic contribution to the first volume of *Les Temps Modernes*, we can see that he understands it as the main task for him and the group of *Les Temps Modernes* to come to grasp with the specific historical situation, and thereby, to open up new perspectives for political action. In this context, we need to take into account that *Les Temps Modernes* was at the forefront of key political battles of the time, with the journal being, e.g., one of the key voices against colonialism and anti-black racism (Altman 2020, 247–49).<sup>1</sup>

But we can already trace this orientation towards political issues in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty develops the concepts of operative intentionality, the body schema, or intercorporeality, among others, to enhance our understanding of how historical power works through our bodies. The telos of the book, represented by its last chapter, are the concepts of conditioned freedom and class consciousness which are meant to understand how, despite all the structural influences shaping their comportment, human beings can make a transformative difference in the world. Merleau-Ponty's highly original political phenomenology might turn out to be his most important contribution to current theoretical developments and political struggles

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<sup>1</sup> In the very first volume of *Les Temps Modernes*, between Sartre's presentation of the journal and Merleau-Ponty's "The War Has Taken Place", there is a translation of Richard Wright's "Fire and Cloud"; and many more translations of African American writers follow. When it comes to *Les Temps Modernes* outspoken opposition to French colonialism, I would like to highlight a series of contributions by the Vietnamese phenomenologist Trần Đức Thảo (1945; 1947a; 1947b).

(Coole 2003; Bedorf 2020). In this paper, however, I will focus on how he understands the phenomenological reduction as a key methodological tool for the development of phenomenology as a critical enterprise. In other words, this paper focuses on Merleau-Ponty's contribution to debates about the methodology of critical phenomenology, and only in passing mentions Merleau-Ponty's engagement with concrete political issues such as capitalism, colonialism, and racism.

## 5. Merleau-Ponty's Understanding of the Phenomenological Reduction

In his definition of phenomenology in the preface of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty explicitly opposes the idealistic understanding of the phenomenological method outlined earlier as well as the distinction of an idealistic and an existential-hermeneutic phenomenology.

Far from being, as was believed, the formula for an idealist philosophy, the phenomenological reduction is in fact the formula for an existential philosophy: Heidegger's '*In-der-Welt- Sein*' [being-in-the-world] only appears against the background of the phenomenological reduction. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxviii)

Merleau-Ponty explains a few lines earlier that the misunderstanding stems from not understanding "that we must – precisely in order to see the world and to grasp it as a paradox – rupture our familiarity with it." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxvii) A break with the natural attitude is required to no longer take the world for granted, but to make its underlying structures accessible for description. When we make such a break with our everyday familiarity, this does not lead us away from the world, however. Instead, "this rupture can teach us nothing except the unmotivated springing forth of the world." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxvii) If we try to suspend our familiarity with the world, this does not make the world disappear, but only makes it all the more intrusive. For it confronts us with the fact that the world precedes all our efforts to understand and describe it. The striking thing about the phenomenological reduction is the following: When we break with the naive acceptance, the taken-for-grantedness of the world, we are confronted even more massively with the fact that the world is always already there, prior to all reflexive efforts on our part.

It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty writes the famous but often misunderstood sentence: "The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxvii) This statement does not mean that the reduction does not work, is unnecessary, or needs to be abandoned. It's also not Merleau-Ponty's announcement of his departure from Husserl. I don't think that

it is even meant as a critique of Husserl. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty considers his understanding of the reduction to be in line with Husserl's. Both understand it as the suspension of the taken-for-grantedness of the world and the thematization of the correlation of subject and world. For Merleau-Ponty, the reduction is a necessary methodological step, because only when conducting the reduction, one encounters "the unmotivated springing forth of the world" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxvii), which Merleau-Ponty considers the most important finding. For the same reason, it is obvious that the phenomenological reduction does not lead away from the (supposedly outer) world into a (supposedly inner) sphere of consciousness. On the contrary, it confronts us with the ineluctable relationality of our bodily being-in-the-world:

The true *Cogito* does not define the existence of the subject through the thought that the subject has of existing, does not convert the certainty of the world into a certainty of the thought about the world, and finally, does not replace the world itself with the signification 'world'. Rather, it recognizes my thought as an inalienable fact and it eliminates all forms of idealism by revealing me as 'being in the world.' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxvii)

Thus, Merleau-Ponty by no means turns away from the phenomenological reduction. Rather, he believes that we need the phenomenological reduction as a break with the everyday familiarity with the world to become aware of the fundamental relationality that we are as bodily being-in-the-world:

Because we are through and through related to the world, the only way for us to catch sight of ourselves is by suspending this movement, by refusing to be complicit with it (or as Husserl often says, to see it *ohne mitzumachen* [without taking part]), or again, to put it out of play. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxvii)

The bracketing of the naive world belief of the natural attitude also includes the social structures and the norms structuring our experiences which we normally take for granted. The phenomenological reduction makes it possible to make these social structures visible and describable, while at the same time making them manifest in their historical and cultural variability. The point of the phenomenological method, then, is to make visible the normally invisible structures that form the basis of our lifeworld. Or to state it more aptly: Phenomenology is about making manifest those structures which are actually always already visible, but are usually not seen, precisely because they are too obvious and taken-for-granted to become conspicuous.

In this context, Guenther speaks of quasi-transcendental structures in order to emphasize that these structures are, on the one hand, contingent and historically variable but, on the other hand, nevertheless function as the constitutive background of our experience (Guenther 2020, 12). However, it is important to note that this is again fully in line with Merleau-Ponty. Moreover, so-called classical phenomenology has, even before Merleau-Ponty, prepared this modified approach to transcendentalism. In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty affirms the transcendental dimension of the question that the phenomenological reduction poses. According to Merleau-Ponty, a transcendental shift from an acceptance of the world in the mode of unreflectively finding one's way around in everyday comportment to questioning the conditions of possibility of those comportments is necessary to encounter the underlying social structures and to transform them into an object of investigation.

However, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the transcendental question takes on a different meaning in Husserl's phenomenology than in Kant's philosophy. First, it no longer poses itself as an epistemological question about the conditions of the possibility of experience, but as an ontological question about the conditions of the possibility of world and subjectivity in their relationality. Second, it is no longer assumed that transcendental reflection can expose ahistorical conditions. Rather, the phenomenological way of raising the transcendental questions (which, after this transformation, might more adequately be called quasi-transcendental) is about making manifest the historically contingent conditions that underlie not only our everyday comportment, but also our possibility of transcendental reflection. According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is concerned with making visible the conditions that are determinative of our existence, while at the same time making us aware of their fundamental contingency and specific becoming. In this way, the phenomenological approach to the transcendental question radically historicizes transcendental conditions of possibility. The remainder of this paper is about understanding in more detail what this entails. Along the way, we will see how the phenomenological reduction, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a necessary methodological step that enables phenomenology to be a critical enterprise.

## 6. Phenomenological Reduction and Radical Situatedness

We have seen that the phenomenological reduction does not relieve the subject carrying out the reduction of the world. On the contrary, the performance of the reduction leads a subject to discover itself as situated in this specific world. In the reception of Merleau-Ponty, this situatedness in a world is usually associated primarily with corporeality. Indeed, large parts of *Phenomenology of Perception* are reserved to describing the body as the medium of being-in-the-world. It is a mistake, however, if this focus

on the body leads one to overlooking that for Merleau-Ponty, this bodily situatedness is precisely about being situatedness in a specific historical situation. For Merleau-Ponty, a subject's "embodiment in a nature" and its situatedness in "an historical situation" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxvi) cannot be separated: It is my body that situates me in a specific historical situation.

This thought also guides the overall structure of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Part One deals with the body as a medium of being-in-the-world. Building on this, Part Two deals with the perceived world, and finally, Part Three treats "Being-for-itself and Being-in-the-world" as a whole. Part Three is divided in three sections. The first summarizes the resulting understanding of subjectivity. The second concerns the question of temporality, before the final section addresses the problem of freedom. Considering the overall structure of *Phenomenology of Perception*, we can see that Merleau-Ponty's remarks on corporeality and perception are embedded in an overall argumentative arch that starts with the central methodological role of the phenomenological reduction and ends with an investigation of the relationship between freedom and history. The investigation of bodily perception thus contributes to developing an understanding of historically situated freedom. All of this is done on the methodological basis of the phenomenological reduction as introduced by Husserl.

The central result of Merleau-Ponty's investigation is the following: When conducting the phenomenological reduction and proceeding with the analysis of our Being-in-the-world that it enables, we are confronted with a radical situatedness that underlies all our efforts at reflection and can never be fully recovered by them. For Merleau-Ponty, this is what distinguishes the phenomenological notion of intentionality from other approaches to human world-relatedness. He writes again with reference to Kant: "What distinguishes intentionality from the Kantian relation to a possible object is that the unity of the world, prior to being posited by knowledge through an explicit act of identification, is lived as already accomplished or as already there." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxxii) In his critique of Kant, Merleau-Ponty echoes Heidegger's claim that "Kant did not see the phenomenon of world" (Heidegger 1996, 295 [321]). However, he does not base this claim on a (supposedly Heideggerian) understanding of phenomenology that rejects the notion of intentionality. Rather, he makes his point against Kant on the ground of the Husserlian notion of intentionality. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is because Kant does not have a phenomenological understanding of intentionality available that he fails to comprehend the phenomenon of world. This is relevant because it also means that Kant does not recognize how power works in history. For Merleau-Ponty, the notion of intentionality distinguishes "phenomenological 'understanding'" from "classical 'intellection'." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxxii) Whereas classical intellection, as he finds

it exemplified by Kant, fails to understand the historical workings of power, phenomenological understanding is about revealing the "*dimensions of history*." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxxii) The core claim of Merleau-Ponty consists in the radical situatedness of the subject in a world that precedes all its efforts and to which it at the same time always remains bound. "Because we are in the world, we are *condemned to sense*, and there is nothing we can do or say that does not acquire a name in history." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxxiii–lxxiv) Whatever we do must take place on the basis of meanings that were not determined by us but come from an earlier time and are sedimented in a world.

However, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis that the world temporally and structurally proceeds all our comportment, including all attempts at understanding it, must not be taken to mean that the world provides a solid ground for our descriptions. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the phenomenological reduction also remains necessarily incomplete in that the world never becomes fully transparent, that it can never be unambiguously determined. Just as the reduction encounters the inseparable relationality of subject and world, it encounters "the *intrinsic* 'indeterminacy', 'opacity', and 'ambiguity' that the phenomenological 'perceived world' contains." (Pollard 2018, 396) Merleau-Ponty deals with this issue first in terms of bodily perception, once again following Husserl. Already simple perceptions reveal that perception is never able to completely grasp its object. Our bodily situatedness has the consequence that we can perceive an object always only from one specific perspective. Perception does not take place from the perspective of God (if that is a meaningful concept at all), but from a specific location. "As a result of this *intrinsically perspectival* nature of bodily perception there can be no pure object." (Pollard 2018, 401) The necessary perspectivity of perception implies that no object can ever be fully grasped, there always remains a residue of indeterminacy.

It is often overlooked that Merleau-Ponty's considerations about our embodiment and the perspectivity of perception are closely connected with his considerations on history and politics. For him, the necessary perspectivity of our world-relatedness is the basic condition of history and at the same time the basis for politics, as seen in his reflections on class consciousness that form one of the key links between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Humanism and Terror*. Similarly, the possibilities of critique remain bound back to our bodily situatedness with its specific perspective on the world and the meanings that it provides.

## 7. Radical Situatedness and Situated Critique

Critical approaches in the tradition of Kant assume that reason is not determined by the empirical situatedness of a subject. A Kantian understanding of transcendental subjectivity implies, in other words, that philosophical thought is not conditioned by the influences of the situation. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that philosophical

reflection springs from a specific historical situation and is motivated by the questions, concerns, and preoccupations that prevail within it. Following Linda Alcoff, we can speak of this issue in terms of "situated reasoning" (Alcoff 2006, 94). On the one hand, it must be emphasized that our reasoning starts from a concrete horizon of experience and is motivated by the specific constellation of this horizon. Our historical situatedness in a specific horizon of experience is the ultimate, both inescapable and not fully dismissible basis of our efforts at reflection: "Thus any attempt to understand our experience can, in principle, only be a deeply historical perspectival understanding – we cannot escape our historicity." (Pollard 2018, 405) On the other hand, there is no reason to draw relativistic conclusions from this radical situatedness. Admittedly, it is no longer plausible to assume that our reasoning can measure itself by ahistorical standards. This does not mean, however, that it is without measure and relativistic in a problematic way.

Rather, Merleau-Ponty proposes that the experience uncovered by reflection, or rather, the intersection of the horizons of experience uncovered in it, functions as the standard by which our reflection is to be measured: "Rationality fits precisely to the experiences in which it is revealed. There is rationality – that is, perspectives intersect, perceptions confirm each other, and a sense appears." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxiv) The central idea can perhaps be summarized as follows: For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is situated critique of those (fundamental but contingent and historically and culturally specific) social structures that underlie all our experience. Central to this is the notion of sense and the idea that there is an autochthonous sense of the world that our reasoning must account for. It is key that "this sense must not be separated, transformed into an absolute Spirit, or transformed into a world in the realist sense. The phenomenological world is not pure being, but rather the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those of others through a sort of gearing into each other." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxiv) Therefore, as Merleau-Ponty writes immediately afterwards, the world is also inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

Let me end with a few tentative remarks on the notion of phenomenology as situated critique which is implied in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the phenomenological method. First, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of phenomenology leads him to understand phenomenological descriptions as intrinsically transformative. For phenomenological descriptions, if they live up to the claims made in them, have the effect of making us see the world anew, which does not allow us to proceed with our comportment as if nothing had happened. Second, we need to understand that critical reasoning can never come to a conclusion. The necessary perspectivity of our experience and the necessary "indeterminacy", "opacity", and "ambiguity" (Pollard 2018, 396) of the world imply

a necessary "hermeneutic and historical incompleteness of the reduction." (Kee 2020, 27) Another consequence of this is that phenomenology is necessarily an intersubjective research program. In Merleau-Ponty's words, phenomenology is "an infinite dialogue or meditation, and, to the very extent that it remains loyal to its intention, it will never know just where it is going." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxv) Merleau-Ponty considers this incompleteness not a weakness, but the key strength of the phenomenological method: "The incompleteness of phenomenology, its constant inchoative character, are not signs of failure, but inevitable insofar as its task is to reveal the mystery of the world and the mystery of reason." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxv) Third, what has just been said implies that phenomenology must take place as a constant reflection on method. For the goal of making us see anew implies that we must adapt how we proceed in our investigations to the specific circumstances of a changing historical situation. The descriptions of social structures must be accompanied by reflection on how these social structures have been made accessible to experience, that is, what has been made visible and what has been obscured by our current practices. Fourth and finally, for Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology's goal of making us see the world anew implies that a work of art or a simple narrative "might signify the world with as much 'depth' as a philosophical treatise." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxv) The key is the "will to grasp the sense of the world or of history in its nascent state" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxv), and according to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is the prime method allowing for this and enabling one to follow the path it opens.

## 8. Conclusion

When developing a critical phenomenology, it is key to address methodological questions. For both the understanding of critique as well as the concept of phenomenology need explication. This paper has presented a take on how Merleau-Ponty can contribute to this enterprise. For Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenological reduction is a necessary methodological step to break with the taken-for-grantedness of the world that is pervasive in the lifeworld and to make manifest the inescapable entanglement of subject and world. When conducting the reduction, we are confronted with the indeterminacy, opacity, and ambiguity (Pollard 2018) of subject and world. The impossibility to make the world fully transparent confronts us with the fact that all understanding is necessarily historical and bound to a specific perspective within a field of forces. The reason why Merleau-Ponty subscribes to the phenomenological method is that he found it to be the prime approach that could make sense of critique as radically situated and of human freedom and agency as radically conditioned by a specific situation and nevertheless the driver of history.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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