

CHAPTER I

Phenomenology and Objective Thought

1.1 Introduction

On the opening page of his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty remarks that phenomenology is a study of 'essences', of the essential features and underlying structures of perception and of consciousness. All of its problems come back to the definition of essences, yet it is also a philosophy for which the understanding of existence demands a return to its humanly lived and engaged factuality or 'facticity'. It seeks to place essences back into existence, finding them interwoven inextricably with our being in the world. We find a strange tension in a philosophy aspiring to be a pure, disengaged and exact science while also showing a remarkable concern with our pre-scientific and taken-for-granted space and time and lived world or lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*).¹ Most of the preface is promissory, signalling how Merleau-Ponty will adopt and adapt what he understands as Husserlian phenomenology. In its course, he characterises Heidegger's *Being and Time* as nothing more than a development of Husserl's explications of our natural conception of the world and lifeworld (*PP*, lxx–lxxi).

From the outset, Husserl regards phenomenology as a science of consciousness by way of its appearances. It commences with the description of our psychologically lived experiences and works back to the universal, invariant and recursive features and significations that the experiences must exhibit to be what they are. We must return to the things or the matters themselves, which means that at every step of the way our word meanings must be clarified and their referents rendered self-evident in fully fledged intuitions or actually lived experiences. And only by tracing what

¹ Merleau-Ponty is wrong to state that Husserl characterises phenomenology as a discipline aspiring to scientific exactitude. It is instead a rigorous science of essences grasped in cognitions warranted by direct lived experience. 'Philosophy as Rigorous Science', trans. Quentin Lauer in Husserl 1981, 166–8, 196.

we purportedly know in our utterances and inscriptions back to lived experience (which is in the first instance perceptual experience) and by describing it rigorously can we uncover the essential forms and laws that warrant knowledge claims (*LI 1*, 168, 178; *LI 2*, 112, 343). When he goes on to take his transcendental turn, Husserl seeks to uncover the a priori structures or conditions of possibility of perceptual and epistemic life as described systematically. It is at this stage of his philosophical career that he thematises our 'natural attitude', or natural belief in the world.

In Merleau-Ponty's view, transcendental phenomenology as formulated by Husserl can be shown to pass more or less seamlessly into existential or humanly situated phenomenology as developed by Heidegger and others (*PP*, lxxvii–lxxviii). I begin this chapter by running through Husserl's account of the natural attitude and his methodology of bracketing and reduction. This proceeds from descriptive to eidetic to transcendental phenomenology, finally questioning back to constituting subjectivity and to constituting sub-consciousness. After outlining Husserl's conception of the transcendental phenomenology of active and passive constitution and explicating some of its initial deliverances, I indicate how Merleau-Ponty takes up this approach and recasts it as an existential project. Phenomenology is humanly situated, begins descriptively and ought to proceed genetically. It is the fundamental antidote to the scientific incarnation of objective thought common to empiricist and intellectualist theories of perception, distorting the descriptions and conclusions of both. Finally, I set out Merleau-Ponty's genealogy of objective thought. In this story he seeks to show why it is so persuasive in its everyday as well as scientific variants.

1.2 From the Descriptive to the Transcendental

When I consider the world in ordinary reflective fashion, according to Husserl, I take it as spread out endlessly in space and having endlessly become in time. In this world, both things and living bodies (those of animals and people) are there for me. Some of the things are immediately present to me – a being who has certain habits and who pursues certain interests – as objects of use and beauty, like the glass for drinking, the vase for flowers and the piano for playing. Other people are present to me as friends or enemies, relatives or strangers or colleagues and students and so on. As I write, I am marginally conscious of the existence of the unseen parts of the room in which I am sitting and of the children playing and chattering out in the garden. By switching my attention and moving, I can successively bring

these people and things into view, converting vague background experiences into more or less clear and focal awareness. In this room, I can assume an aesthetic attitude as a musician or listener, or an arithmetical attitude when working through a mathematical proof, but these particular attitudes exhibited by myself and others are nested within a natural attitude or natural belief in the world as existing for all of us (*Ids1*, 51–6).

This naive attitude is often given a strongly naturalistic slant when explicitly formulated as a thesis. It is not just that the world is taken to have existed before my birth and that it is expected to persist after my demise. For physicalistic naturalism, it is at root the world of matter and is therefore best dealt with by the natural sciences. Husserl now makes the first move in his transcendental phenomenological method. The natural attitude is thematised by being placed in parentheses or brackets and put under suspension (*epochè*). This term was used by Pyrrho of Elis and Sextus Empiricus, who held that a consistent scepticism must be sceptical about its own claims, since we cannot even know when we know and when we do not. For Husserl, I must not precipitously claim that I can address the question of the world's existence by providing an unprejudiced answer one way or another. To place the natural attitude under suspension is neither to affirm nor deny that there is an external world that exists apart from me and all of my thoughts. In bracketing the attitude and putting it out of play, I am deliberately *neutral* about its status, which looks like a sceptical move. But this is only done to put it at a distance, so that the overall belief can be silhouetted or shown forth in its full relief. Husserl realises that we must first get the character and sense of the attitude right, and we must also foreground and explicate what it presupposes (*Ids1*, 56–62; *Ids2*, 189–93).

In this way, bracketing and suspension (which Husserl often telescopes into the nomenclature of reduction) lays the ground for descriptive phenomenology, which is carried out in the descriptive reduction (reduction as understood in the sense of *re-ducere* or leading back). The natural attitude is silhouetted so it can itself become a phenomenon for elucidation; I go back to what has been placed at a distance in order to bring out its character and implicit sense for me. Revealing the tacit senses and meanings of phenomena behind the explicit ones is the royal road – and indeed the sole road – to a rigorous science of consciousness. But only at the theoretical level can I put the attitude out of play and return to it. Only in the 'transcendental attitude' can I be a philosophically reflective and disengaged onlooker of my ordinary believing experience. And to elucidate the sense of the attitude is to describe the way it is adhered to unthinkingly. Over the whole time I seek to uncover its significance, notes Husserl, I am

living within it. What is most important are not the explicit and affirmative judgements that I sometimes make about the world's existence, but my ongoing and pre-reflective world-belief. Even if a particular thing turns out to be different from what I thought, to the extent of being a hallucination, I do not doubt the wider world in which it appears. Through the flow of background appearances the world's existence is assumed continually. The character of the attitude is that of a fundamental belief or faith in the world's existence, with the implicit sense of it being utterly unquestionable. This leads me to take its existence as absolute and independent whenever I think about it in everyday life, whether or not I posit that existence as physical at its most real (*Idsr*, 56–7, 129; *Id2*, 192–3).

More than the natural belief must be put in parentheses, since it is only held by a consciousness by virtue of appearances for that consciousness. For this reason, the entire phenomenon of the experiencing being who lives believably in the natural attitude and who can put it forward in a thesis has to be bracketed. Put another way, its flow of awareness with its memories and imaginings and perceptual objects and perceptual fields must be placed in parentheses, and with them its lived body and everything perceived in and on and from it. Everything must be placed under the *epochē* so that nothing is lost for the descriptive reduction (*Idsr*, 112–3, 125–6, 172). Whatever I perceive thematically is something that is implicated in a state of affairs or situation, such as the steep hill that I am seeing in front of me and above me and feeling under my feet, and that I am ascending with some difficulty to get exercise and to enjoy a panoramic view from the summit. What is bracketed for elucidation is the whole experience, the phenomenon of the seen hill and anticipated panorama within the world for this conscious existent *and* the attendant phenomenon of my body as engaged in the climbing activity. Perceived and believed and perceiver and believer are preserved as correlates of each other. The conscious embodied existent for whom objects and world come to appearance and claim being must itself be a factor in their description (*CM*, 33–5; *CES*, 99–100).

Husserl is well aware that the route to phenomenological description looks deceptively simple. In the 'splitting of the ego' consequent on the suspension of the natural attitude, one has to reach the level of disengaged reflection while at the same time endeavouring to capture one's I and everyday flow of acting and believing life. Given that all of us have our individual habitualities, interests and inheritances, moreover, it is difficult to avoid importing hidden hypotheses and inferences into description. The performance of the *epochē* and reduction requires extensive training in the

avoidance of over-interpretation. We cannot actualise the ideals of freedom from prejudice and disinterested knowledge in one fell swoop (*CM*, 35–6; *CES*, 154–5); and of course description presupposes language. We can never eliminate all vagueness and ambiguity from natural language, with its indexicals or essentially occasional expressions whose meanings are bound up with the contexts of utterances or inscriptions (*LI 1*, 223–4). Yet we can employ terms that are warranted experientially. We can also examine whether a term that was fixed in earlier contexts of use has the same sense in a new context (*IdSI*, 66, 151–2).

These strictures also apply to the subsequent stages of the phenomenological reduction. When description has done its work, I proceed to the eidetic reduction; I go back to a foregrounded phenomenon to discover its essential characteristics. An essence or *eidōs* is a characteristic it must possess to be a phenomenon and to be the type that it is. It is revealed when I work over the appearance through a systematic process of free imaginative variation. If I am looking at my table, I think and imagine that it need not be a deep and rich walnut colour to count as a visual phenomenon. Nor does it have to be rectangular or have four legs. But free imaginative variation reveals that it must have some colour and shape, which tells me that colour and figure and extension are not only interdependent parts or moments of a visual phenomenon, but essential to it. Once I discover that they cannot be removed without destroying the very possibility of this type of appearance, I have apprehended at least part of its essence in an eidetic intuition (*CM*, 70–1; *LI 2*, 5–7).

When I turn my attention to the overall lived experiences (*Erlebnisse*) of seeing and valuing and imagining and judging, Husserl observes that those which are describable in the everyday first-person and phenomenologically purified perspectives possess the essential feature of being intentional experiences. Intentionality is the directedness or ‘aboutness’ that is characteristic of all these episodes:

Intentional experiences have the peculiarity of directing themselves in varying fashion to presented objects, but they do so in an intentional sense. An object is ‘referred to’ or ‘aimed at’ in them in the manner of a presentation or likewise a judgment and so on. This means no more than that certain experiences are present, intentional in character, and, more specifically, presentationally, judicatively, desiringly or otherwise intentionally. There are (to ignore certain exceptions) not two things present in experience; we do not experience the object and beside it the intentional experience directed upon it. There are not even two things present in the sense of a part and a whole which contains it: only one thing is present, the

6 Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*

intentional experience, whose essential descriptive character is the intention in question. . . . If this experience is present, then eo ipso and through its own essence (we must insist) the intentional 'relation' to an object is achieved and an object is 'intentionally present'; these two phrases mean precisely the same.² (*LI 2*, 98)

Expressions to the effect that something is 'within the mind' or 'immanent in consciousness' are highly misleading, for they suggest that consciousness is a sort of container that has or comes to have things inside itself. Husserl stresses that there are not at first acts that go out to objects (things in states of affairs and truths) and then internalise them. Rather, the conscious acts only exist in their having gone out; they do not enjoy original separation from their objects (*LI 2*, 98, 100). All objects are irreducible to the acts of intending them, which is to say that they transcend or go beyond consciousness, whether they are mathematical truths or mythical beings or the blossoming trees in front of me. The relevant objects can still be described (*LI 2*, 99, 126–7), and in the case of worldly things, it cannot cease to be emphasised that their transcendence in the fullest sense must be preserved by the *epochē* as a phenomenon for explication through all the reductions. And the thing perceived is not a second object 'out there' that lies behind an intentional object 'in here'. There is no need to representationally duplicate an object into image and reality, since the intentional object is the same as the actual one. The point is that consciousness has reached the latter perceptually (*LI 2*, 126–7; *IdS*, 218–20).

The terminology of reaching an object is not univocal, since acts of memory and imagination have by definition reached their objects in their own ways, which cannot be supplanted if the relevant objects are only accessible through these modes. But memorial and imaginative determinations are surpassed when things and states of affairs perceivable empirically come to be perceived. These considerations help to ground the crucial distinction that Husserl makes between signitive intending and intuitive fulfilment. To intend a worldly something signitively is to aim at the relevant object without that object as yet being present perceptually, that is, given in flesh and blood in sensuous or empirical intuition. To the extent that an intention is signitive, it is *empty*. I am more obviously intending in this mode when frantically looking for my house keys before journeying to an urgent appointment. I imagine where they might be and retrace my steps, trying to remember where I put them. When I eventually

² Translation emended.

track them down, the signitive and empty intending gives way to intuitive givenness or fulfilment. It is filled by a direct perceptual presentation. To the extent that empirical emptiness gives way to direct presence, the presence is *fulfilling*. The finding of the keys is a case of dynamic fulfilment, since there is a temporal stretch between the initial intending and its satisfaction. In cases of static fulfilment, the intention and its fulfilment occur together. When out walking, I was not thinking of rabbits before one dashed out onto the path in front of me (*LI 2*, 206–7, 218–20).

Descriptive and eidetic phenomenology would fall short badly if intentionality were taken as a simple two-term structure; we can and should discern three essential characteristics of every conscious or act-intentional experience. In a perceptual act most notably we can distinguish the real act with its qualities, the act matter or content and the relevant object intended and intuited. The real act is the conscious experience itself as a transient event in the flow of awareness that will never be again. It has qualities of believing and valuing and is sense-giving or meaning-conferring (*LI 1*, 192; *LI 2*, 113, 119–22). The act matter is the complex of sense and meaning that the act carries and confers on sensory deliverances. It is the interpreting content through which we are presented with an object as a significant unity. At the outset, it is a pre-predicative ‘apprehending sense’ (*Auffassungssinn*) established in early infancy, which soon comes to be worked over with meanings or expressive significations (*Bedeutungen*). Meanings articulate objects conceptually and predicatively when we enter the cognitive realm in language (*LI 1*, 214, 280–1; *LI 2*, 121–2, 161–2; *APS*, 33). The earliest acts with their apprehending senses are founding, whereas the later acts of conceptualising and judging are founded. They articulate objects into general types and their component parts. Because of these expressive articulations, we encounter objects in developed awareness as unities of sense with reportable meanings (*LI 2*, 116, 284–7; *IdsI*, 297; *APS*, 296). The contribution of the interpreting content can be brought out by explicating, not just why we perceive, but what we perceive, the way we perceive and how we perceive.

Why we perceive is initially answered in the naïve attitude. When others and things do not break in through our senses, they are sought out for essential purposes and because they attract us in other ways. If harmful or repulsive we avoid them. But the question of *what* we perceive shows the descriptive reduction employed more extensively. For Husserl, we do not see or hear or touch bare sense data. Hence one is not confronted with red and yellow patches on grey, or rising and falling tones, or a green expanse flecked with purple and white and surmounted by a blue expanse, with

everything bobbing up and down. It is rather that I see the matchbox on the mantelpiece, or hear the singer's song on the radio, or see and feel the flower-strewn hill that I am ascending under the sky (*LI 2*, 99; *APS*, 121–2). Because the interpreting content is at work, I do not first look at and hear my sensations and subsequently turn them into perceptual objects. In this direct empirical realism, sense and meaning are given *with* the sensations they inform, not plastered on afterwards. Intentional acts of perceiving are directed towards already significant unities, which tells us that the sensations are not themselves intentional. Without doubt they are essential moments of perception, but what we aim at and experience are the objects that they present. This is why we should say that we do not perceive our sensations, but *have* them. We can zone in on patches, colours and tones as such, but these presentations presuppose earlier experiences from which they have been abstracted as derivative parts from original wholes (*LI 1*, 214; *LI 2*, 99, 103–4).

The *way* that we perceive empirically is unavoidably perspectival. Each of us experiences from only one standpoint, and our objects are apprehended as spatially exterior to us. Their mode of givenness is therefore partial or inadequate. In vision, for example, what I see of the matchbox or hill is that aspect or profile (*Abschattung*) of the object that presents one or more sides from this or that standpoint – several sides of the matchbox or one prospect of the hill – while its other sides remain hidden. We typically think that, if a supreme and infinite being exists, then such a divinity will enjoy the complete and adequate perceptual grasp that we lack because of our finitude. Husserl's reply is twofold; we cannot even imagine what it would be like to have an all-in-all experience of something, and if God could have that adequate grasp of the thing that we lack, then the transcendent existence of a thing would lose its significance in fact and principle. The second proposition is a contradiction or countersense (*Widersinn*), for it implies no essential difference between something immanent or transcendent. Were God to have this totalising grasp, the thing would be actually and not just intentionally immanent, a mere moment within a divine flow of awareness encapsulating it fully (*Idst*, 92; *APS*, 48, 56).

If a worldly object is always given inadequately, it is nonetheless a truism that in sensuous perception we take ourselves as experiencing the entire existent. We are not surprised when something reveals further aspects in rotating or when we move around it. Over the course of the perception, we tacitly interpret every aspect that is directly present as a part of a wider whole. This implies we are signitively intending other aspects of the object – the ones not directly present right now – as potentially present

in the future. Here as so often elsewhere, Husserl is careful to keep his descriptions faithful to the phenomena. We do not expect that one or other hidden side *will* be there if we go around the object, for it is 'co-intended' as *already* there, as another extant part of the whole. Rather, we expect that it will come into view. In co-intending it is 'appresented' as indirectly on the scene yet available. As a new aspect comes into direct and fulfilling presence, furthermore, the earlier aspect becomes hidden in its turn. What was the front side is now the rear side. There is thus an ongoing interplay of gain and loss in perception, and it is of particular note that signitive and empty intending never becomes redundant. No matter what standpoint one may come to assume, the aspects that remain hidden are being signified all the time. We discover that it is essential to the apprehending sense of perceptual awareness, not merely to make direct presentation significant, but in so doing to be co-intending *beyond* what is directly present towards potential fulfilments of what is occluded. Conscious or intentional awareness in interpreting what we call the given reaches beyond itself and beyond the given. Intentionality of its very nature points forward into possibility (*LI* 2, 2II, 227–8; *CM*, 46).

In Husserl's later terminology, the real act or the conscious experience is the noesis, and the apprehending sense (and later the meaning) along with the interpreted sensations the noema. The noema is the thing *as* it is intended significantly (*IdS*, 213–8). Everything emptily intended in the noematic sense of an object as also there and as a possible appearance comprises its *horizon*. Perception is intrinsically horizational, and its acts in their signitive co-intendings are never completely empty. On foot of past fulfilments we remember other aspects of things and of living beings. In pointing forwards, we unthinkingly project the colour of the vase into its hidden aspects, and we take the carpet as soft and deep and pleasant to kneel on. Even when we have not seen an object of a certain type before, we read its visible qualities into its invisible ones. Accordingly a horizon is a predelineation of potentialities, a fore-sketching in which we do not merely appresent hidden aspects as already there, but anticipate what they will look like and feel like and so on (*LI* 2, 2II, 241; *CM*, 44–5, 48; *APS*, 42, 79). But we must qualify this, for the predelineating projection of certain qualities into the rear side of an empirical thing does not involve imagining that side as seen. If we could form a head-on image of the rear in attentively seeing the front, this imaginative picture would itself be perspectival and horizational, referring back to the front side. We would be faced with a regress, and in the first instance the imagined far side of the imagined rear would be an image mysteriously superimposed on the aspect that is directly present perceptually (*TS*, 47–8).

The intuitive and signitive and horizational are blended together in unified perceptual intentionalities (*LI* 2, 224). The predelineation of potentialities does not for all that pertain to an isolated thing, and Husserl distinguishes the inner and outer horizon of an empirical object. The first is everything co-intended of the object itself, while the second includes the perceptual field or background around it and by implication where and when it will typically appear. In concert they point forward to a determinable indeterminacy, where fulfilment makes more determinate the inevitable vagueness of memory and imagination (*IdSI*, 52; *APS*, 42). Because perception is on ongoing as against a momentary act, however, we should refer to an on ongoing synthesis of fulfilments that successively fulfils and confirms what is signitively co-intended and predelineated. Yet there is always the possibility that what comes to be viewed or touched will turn out to be different to what was expected. The rear of a vase may be a different colour, and a carpet hard and grainy rather than soft with a deep pile. A synthesis of fulfilment of horizational expectations can become a synthesis of frustration. The perceptual certainty we enjoy in the natural attitude is therefore a contingent certainty, since it is dependent on a course of experiences continuing to confirm and enrich what came before. Perception is always inadequate, and its sense and meaning open to correction by subsequent perceptions, so the indeterminacy of its objects cannot be made fully determinate. There is always something more and it may turn out otherwise (*LI* 2, 212–3; *CM*, 15–7; *APS*, 43, 64–5).

Certain experiences of frustration bring such claims to even better evidence, showing that a phenomenology of 'nullifying illusion' is utterly indispensable for a phenomenology of genuine actuality (*IdSI*, 364). One of these is recounted by Husserl following a visit to a waxworks museum. As he goes through the entrance doors, he sees a woman descending the grand staircase and smiling at him. But as he advances further, things start to jar and look discordant. Her face is frozen and so is her out-stepped foot. Then he realises that 'she' is a wax figure put there to deceive the new visitor. The experience of frustration is the 'explosion' of the noema's horizational predelineation. The core noematic sense of encountering an enduring pole of identity remains, but the rich sense and conceptual and reportable meaning significations of a real woman have been destroyed. This tells us that the significance of the perceived is not indifferent to the co-perceived or co-present background. In his outer horizon of a waxworks figure, Husserl expects to see it on a pedestal in a gallery, and in his outer horizon of a real woman descending a staircase, he expects to see her hands and feet synchronised with the balustrade and stairs, whether or not she sees him