

Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Inkpin, A

Title:

Was Merleau-Ponty a 'transcendental' phenomenologist?

Date:

2017-03-01

Citation:

Inkpin, A. (2017). Was Merleau-Ponty a 'transcendental' phenomenologist?. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 50 (1), pp.27-47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-016-9394-0>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/282545>

Was Merleau-Ponty a ‘transcendental’ phenomenologist?

There is considerable scope for disagreement over whether or not Merleau-Ponty’s version of phenomenology should be considered a form of ‘transcendental’ philosophy. On the one hand, his willingness to integrate and exploit empirical scientific results, his denial of a radical break with the natural attitude, and conspicuous differences between his views and Husserl’s might lead one to think Merleau-Ponty’s position cannot be a transcendental one. On the other hand, his criticisms of objective thinking, particularly its role in science, and parallels with traditional transcendental idealism might lead one to conclude it must be. Moreover, many passages in his work make clear that Merleau-Ponty himself thought of his position as transcendental in some sense.

This paper will consider, in three stages, whether Merleau-Ponty succeeds in meeting what I will call the *transcendentalist challenge* of defining and grounding transcendental claims, i.e. whether he identifies a kind of validity distinguishing transcendental claims (from empirical claims, say) and makes clear how this can be secured by a phenomenological method. The first section looks briefly at Husserl, highlighting three features he relied on in defining phenomenology as a form of transcendental philosophy. This will provide both a model of how a phenomenological approach is able to meet the transcendentalist challenge and some background relevant in understanding and assessing Merleau-Ponty’s views. The paper’s second section examines how Merleau-Ponty modifies those features of Husserl’s approach while presenting his position as a revised form of transcendental phenomenology. The final section considers whether the position Merleau-Ponty develops can still legitimately claim to be a transcendental one. My basic argument will be that – despite his own rhetoric – this position changes the modality of phenomenological claims in such a way that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology cannot meet the transcendentalist challenge and should therefore not be considered ‘transcendental’.

1 Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology

Husserl’s project of providing empirical science with a nonempirical philosophical grounding to some extent paralleled Brentano’s ‘descriptive psychology’ in seeking to define the subject-matter – the explananda – for empirical psychology by describing

mental states from the perspective of first-personal experience.¹ However, Husserl thought this task requires an account of ideality and normativity (to define completely psychological entities and the truth-orientation of empirical enquiry) that neither empirical nor descriptive psychology can provide due to their ‘superstitious’ adherence to facts.² Hence, despite apparently sharing its subject-matter with both descriptive psychology and what he called ‘phenomenological psychology’, Husserl considered it necessary to distinguish and conceive phenomenology as a ‘transcendental’ mode of investigation.³

To see this what this distinction involves, I want to highlight three key features of Husserl’s position – focusing mainly on *Ideas I* and the *Cartesian Meditations* – that might be taken to define it as a ‘transcendental’ one.⁴ The first two result from the fact that Husserl retains Brentano’s emphasis on first-personhood and experience, while modifying or transfiguring both into a transcendental equivalent. Thus Husserl often characterizes phenomenology’s domain of study in terms of, first, the ‘transcendental’ or absolute ego and, second, as a ‘field’ of ‘pure’ phenomena. Effecting the required modification of empirical subjects and their lived experience is the task – third – of the phenomenological reduction. This involves disregarding (‘bracketing’) the ‘validity’ (*Geltung*) of intentional objects or acts, i.e. disregarding whether the objects or states of affairs they involve are actual/real or possible/fictive.⁵ In effect this means that for the purposes of phenomenology, specifically in discerning and describing the structure of intentional objects and acts, Husserl believes the difference between reality and possibility (*Wirklichkeit/Möglichkeit*) does not ground a methodologically significant constraint.

These three notions – the transcendental ego, the field of pure phenomena, and the phenomenological reduction – come together in Husserl’s conception of phenomenology as a distinctive mode of enquiry. The point of the reduction is to

¹ See Brentano (1995, p. 139).

² Husserl (1987, p. 56).

³ Somewhat confusingly, Husserl (1968, p. 288) further distinguishes ‘pure phenomenological psychology’ that ‘parallels’ transcendental phenomenology in method and content. One might suspect, with Derrida (1993, pp. 11-12), that such ‘parallelism’ undermines the intended distinction. In investigating the counterfactual, however, transcendental phenomenology is attributed an extended field of enquiry that secures necessity, so that its claims differ in their underlying justification and modality (see below).

⁴ Zahavi (2002) has argued persuasively that many of Merleau-Ponty’s views are found in Husserl’s later and unpublished work. For my purposes here, however, what matters is how differences between Merleau-Ponty’s and the early Husserl views affect the former’s ability to make transcendental claims.

⁵ Husserl (1950, p. 60 [§8]). ‘Geltung’ is sometimes, somewhat misleadingly, rendered in English as ‘acceptance’.

shake off any accountability to the way the world happens to be. This obviously distinguishes phenomenology from empirical sciences, since under the reduction, as Husserl puts it, ‘no experience, qua experience, [...] can take on *the function of justification*’.⁶ However, it also distinguishes phenomenology from *any* empirically conditioned mode of enquiry, i.e. any enquiry affording priority to the way the world in fact is over how it might be, or that remains tied to the investigator’s initial situation. It is in this sense of effecting a principled break with accountability to facts (or actuality) that Husserl considers phenomena to be absolute or ‘pure’. The phenomenological reduction also secures an extended field of study for phenomenology. Rather than being limited to the study of actual experience, Husserl affirms that for phenomenology’s purposes fictive or ‘as if’ experience is just as good as – and perhaps better than – experience of the real.⁷ Accordingly, for Husserl the notions of description and experience are no longer limited to what’s real: ‘empirical description’ is complemented by ‘eidetic description’, while the whole of this extended field is to be accessible in ‘transcendental experience’.⁸ Finally, Husserl thinks we are able to exploit this extended field by actively exploring it through processes of ‘imaginative’ or ‘free variation’.⁹ That is, we can imagine any specific features of intentional acts/objects being manipulated or varied in manifold ways, and by this means systematically explore the structural features of intentionality without being bound by facts (the actual world’s contingent state).

Against this background we can see clearly how Husserl could cash out the idea that phenomenology is a transcendental discipline. First, because it is independent of experience (in the normal, nontranscendental, sense), the extended field of phenomena forms an ‘apriori’ domain of study: ‘eidetic phenomenology thus researches the universal apriori’.¹⁰ Second, free variation is to function as a general methodological tool that enables the constitution of intentional objects to be investigated. By working through all conceivable contexts in which a particular object/act (etc.) might feature, the phenomenologist will be able to discern (‘intuit’) its essential structures. In Husserl’s words, by investigating how ‘objective units’ are constituted in consciousness, phenomenology is concerned with ‘problems that are

⁶ Husserl (1976, p. 20 f. [§7]).

⁷ Husserl (1976, pp. 16-7 [§4]). A fact that Sartre (1966, pp. 17-18) appears to have misunderstood.

⁸ Husserl (1950, pp. 103, 66 [§34, §12]). Empirical and eidetic description together yield ‘universal description’ (Husserl 1950, p. 75 [§15]).

⁹ Husserl (1950, p. 105 [§34]).

¹⁰ Husserl (1950, p. 106 [§34]).

transcendental in the specific sense [...] and *hence* merits the name transcendental phenomenology'.¹¹ Finally, Husserl has some justification for claiming that the resultant knowledge of essential structures differs in modality from empirical claims, comprising necessary rather than merely contingent truths. For essential or eidetic structures are supposed to be being investigated in an apriori possibility space, and to be those structures that remain invariant over all possible variations – so to speak, in all possible intentional worlds. Thus Husserl claims to be investigating not just the real fabric of intentionality, but the 'conditions of possibility' underlying each of its constitutive features.

In sum, on Husserl's view, the claims made by phenomenology are 'transcendental' in the sense that they are apriori, necessary (essential) claims about the constitution of features of intentionality. Historically speaking, his conception of what a 'transcendental' claim is thus closely parallels Kant's canonical view in terms of both thematic focus and modality.¹² Of course, Kant and Husserl disagree over the method for securing such claims (e.g. the role of intuition). However, this is precisely because Husserl's aim is to show how Kant's goal of philosophically grounding empirical knowledge can be met by a phenomenological approach rather than transcendental arguments.

Before leaving Husserl, several points should be noted that will prove important in considering Merleau-Ponty. First, on Husserl's view, a focus on intentionality, consciousness, or the first-person perspective, all of which it shares with descriptive (and phenomenological) psychology, does not suffice to define phenomenology. Rather, phenomenology is distinguished from both empirical and descriptive psychology by making claims with a *specific modality* – apriority and necessity – that has traditionally defined transcendental claims. This modality is to distinguish the validity of transcendental claims from that of nontranscendental claims about otherwise indistinguishable subject matter.

Second, whatever one thinks of Husserl's method or overall position, it is striking that the central features of his position are attuned to its supposed ability to make claims of the traditional transcendental kind. More specifically, his proposed method is tailored to the modal or logical requirements of such claims: while

¹¹ Husserl (1976, p. 198 [§86]); cf. also Husserl (1950, p. 114 f. [§40]).

¹² For Kant transcendental knowledge is concerned with 'our way of knowing objects in so far as this is to be possible apriori' (Kant 1983, p. 63 [B 25]). On the necessity of synthetic apriori judgements see *ibid.*, p. 201 [B 197].

apriority, or independence from experience and actual facts, is to be secured by the epoché, necessity is to be assured by exploring the field of pure phenomena, as extended to include (bracketed) ‘as if’ or counterfactual states.¹³ In the terms introduced above, Husserl therefore meets the transcendentalist challenge by clearly characterizing transcendental validity and tailoring phenomenological method to the justification of such claims.

Finally, although Husserl often treats the three features highlighted above as broadly interchangeable, the role of the absolute or transcendental subject is arguably less central than the other two. Indeed, in later writings Husserl recognizes both that other intentional structures (e.g. the lifeworld) can serve as a starting point for phenomenology, and that transcendental subjects fall under the higher-level structures of transcendental intersubjectivity (5th Cartesian Meditation). By contrast, the phenomenological reduction – which transfigures empirically given intentional structures into their pure equivalents – remains indispensable.¹⁴ In other words, for Husserl it is not as such the relation to an absolute ego that defines phenomenology as transcendental. Rather, as he often emphasizes, it is the reduction that is central to the ability of phenomenology to access pure phenomena and to make transcendental claims.¹⁵

2 Merleau-Ponty: transcendental phenomenology reinterpreted

It is conspicuous that Merleau-Ponty either overtly criticizes or clearly modifies the three features of Husserl’s phenomenology highlighted above. To assess whether Merleau-Ponty’s own position should be considered ‘transcendental’, it will therefore be instructive to consider his response to each feature in turn. Although I believe Merleau-Ponty’s later writings retain these views, for reasons of space I focus here primarily on *Phenomenology of Perception*.¹⁶

¹³ Although sometimes criticized for its supposed obscurity (e.g. Bell 1990, p. 162) – a view some of his own comments encourage (e.g. Husserl 1976, p. 201 [§87]; 1954, p. 140 [§35]) – the attitude Husserl’s method requires is thus a well-defined stance of theoretically motivated abstraction and imaginative exploration of possibilities of a kind typical of mathematical thinking.

¹⁴ See Husserl (1954, pp. 154-9 [§§41-44]), where the discussion of the lifeworld leads on to the epoché. What is new in Husserl’s late writings is not a rejection of transcendental phenomenology, but the identification of different starting points or ways into it (as emphasized by Kern 1977).

¹⁵ Cf. Husserl’s argument that without the reduction phenomenology would collapse into philosophical anthropology. For Husserl (1989, p. 172), to miss ‘the meaning of the reduction, which is the only gateway to the new realm [of pure phenomena]’ is to miss ‘everything’.

¹⁶ Occasionally footnotes will signal parallel passages or commitments in the *Visible and Invisible*.

2.1 Transcendental and embodied subjectivity

Of the three features of Husserl's position discussed above, the one Merleau-Ponty most obviously rejects is 'absolute' or 'transcendental' consciousness, an idea linked throughout the *Phenomenology* with 'intellectualism' and Kant (or neo-Kantians), but which clearly also characterizes the early Husserl.¹⁷ Thus Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea of a timeless and absolute subject that accompanies or underlies all experience as its 'condition of possibility', and 'constitutes' intentional structures through acts of 'synthesis'.¹⁸ Instead he conspicuously focuses on embodied agents, i.e. the lived body, as something finite and essentially situated in its practical and temporal world, the overall functionality of which Merleau-Ponty abbreviates using the term 'body schema'.¹⁹

It can easily seem that for Merleau-Ponty the human body assumes the same (logical, metaphysical, or transcendental) role as that often assigned to an absolute subject.²⁰ For example, embodied agents are the bearers of consciousness – albeit 'perceptual consciousness' as opposed to an intellectualized 'constituting consciousness'.²¹ Indeed, it was the need to take account of the perspective of lived consciousness that first led Merleau-Ponty, towards the end of *The Structure of Behaviour*, to speak of his position as requiring a 'transcendental attitude'.²² Moreover, much of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is dedicated to the human body's central role in forming what might be loosely called 'meaning', or in Merleau-Ponty's terms the 'sense' (*sens*) that defines the oriented existential space human agents inhabit.²³ As he puts it at one point, alluding to the formation of meaningful Gestalt structures, one's 'own body is the third term, always implied, of the figure-ground structure'.²⁴ For Merleau-Ponty embodied agency thus replaces absolute subjectivity as the bearer of consciousness that – in some sense at least – functions as the foundation of intentional structures.²⁵

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 51, 240 f. and passim).

¹⁸ That is, an 'absolute constituting consciousness' which is 'subject neither to time nor to any limitation' (Merleau-Ponty 1976, pp. 51, 426).

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 117).

²⁰ Baldwin (2004, 2013), for example, holds that for Merleau-Ponty 'our embodiment functions as a kind of transcendental subjectivity' (Baldwin 2013, p. 201).

²¹ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 404).

²² Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 217).

²³ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 272, cf. p. 171 f.).

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 117).

²⁵ It is tempting to talk of a 'condition of possibility', but this term – I argue below – is problematic in the context of Merleau-Ponty's thinking.

At the same time, there are important differences between the role of embodied agents, as Merleau-Ponty conceives them, and the transcendental subject's traditional role. For example, Merleau-Ponty often resists describing the body's feats as a 'synthesis' on the grounds that this presupposes – in the manner of 'objective thought' – a manifold made up of distinct elements.²⁶ Similarly, he resists talking of embodied agents as 'constituting' sense to avoid suggesting a one-sided, active operation performed by the subject.²⁷ Instead, where he does talk of sense constitution, this refers to the embodied agent's participation in a process of 'co-existence', 'communion' or 'exchange' with its surroundings.²⁸ Intentional objects, paradigmatically objects of perception, are to acquire concrete form through an interaction between the body as 'a universal set-up [*montage universel*], something typical of all perceptual developments' and 'the segment of the world that we are actually perceiving'.²⁹

These differences are not merely terminological, but reflect Merleau-Ponty's rejection of several traditional assumptions about subjectivity. Thus, to avoid one-sided orientation towards either the *en soi* or the *pour soi*, he focuses on the dynamics of interaction, the dialectic relation between an embodied agent and its surroundings (as well as its own past and future): 'The body is only one element in the system of the subject and its world'.³⁰ Consequently, Merleau-Ponty's position is less subject-centred – even in his earliest works – than it might initially seem: the body is immersed in and co-defined by its world, so that the two are inseparable: 'the subject and the object [are] as two abstract moments of a single structure which is *presence*'.³¹ Further, given this interaction and their openness to their surroundings, Merleau-Ponty argues that embodied agents are characterized not by immanence but by transcendence.³² That is, the states and objects that enter into embodied

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 306; cf. also pp. iv, 320n, 490): 'What do we have, then, at the beginning? Not a multiple given with a synthetic apperception [...] but a certain perceptual field against the background of the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 279).

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 404).

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 247 f.). In Merleau-Ponty's (1976, p. 245) words, 'The subject of perception [...] is a power that co-emerges with, and synchronizes itself with, a certain environment of existence'.

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 377).

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 123; cf. similarly pp. 60, 73).

³¹ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 492).

³² Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 431 ff.). See also his characterizations of embodied agents as having an 'eccentric' constitution (Merleau-Ponty 1976, pp. 405, 512).

consciousness are – like perceived physical objects – incompletely and perspectively given, so that its (self-)awareness is always, on principle, imperfect or incomplete.³³

Merleau-Ponty's modifications to Husserl's or Kant's conception of absolute subjectivity raise interesting questions about his relation to the tradition of transcendental philosophy. Most obviously perhaps, it is certainly open to debate whether Merleau-Ponty is some form of 'idealist'. Given the similarities mentioned above, one might conclude he is, and hence see him as continuing the tradition of transcendental idealism. Alternatively, one might think Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodiment is not sufficiently agent-centred to be properly considered a form of 'idealism'.³⁴ Indeed, part of the challenge of Merleau-Ponty's position is that this question is *too* open: whether or not he is labelled an 'idealist' will depend on which of these similarities and differences (there are clearly both) are accentuated.

Independently of the issue of idealism, however, focusing on the relation between embodied and absolute subjectivity will not suffice in deciding whether Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is a transcendental approach. One indication of this, pointed out above, is that the commitment to absolute subjectivity was not decisive in defining Husserl's phenomenology as a transcendental position. But irrespective of Husserl's views, how closely embodied subjectivity resembles absolute subjectivity and whether phenomenology is transcendental are distinct questions. Thus, recognizing parallels between embodied and absolute subjectivity may not suffice to secure claims that are transcendental in kind. Conversely, identifying differences between the two forms of subjectivity does not exclude Merleau-Ponty's claims about the role of the body in its surroundings being intended as transcendental claims, e.g. as necessary, apriori claims about the constitution of intentional structures.

To see how these questions are distinct, consider a more general proposal. One might argue that in putting forward an overall picture of human agency in relation to its surroundings Merleau-Ponty is answering traditional transcendental philosophical questions.³⁵ But having such an overall picture, I suggest, does not suffice to make a

³³ This follows Husserl's definition of immanence and transcendence in §42 of *Ideas I*. Perception is an 'open field', human experience an 'open totality whose synthesis cannot be achieved' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 12; Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 254). As a 'third genre of being between the pure subject and the object, the [embodied] subject loses its purity and transparency' (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 402).

³⁴ Recall Merleau-Ponty's emphasis that the 'most important acquisition of phenomenology is no doubt to have combined the extreme of subjectivism and the extreme of objectivism in its notion of the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. xv).

³⁵ Gardner (2015) suggests that proposing such an overall picture – a metaphysics – is part of what distinguishes Merleau-Ponty's position from psychology and contemporary philosophy of mind,

position transcendental. After all, much empirical work in cognitive science – particularly in the embodied-embedded tradition – also offers a similar overall picture, while identifying the conditions under which features of the world show up to cognitive agents.³⁶ This generalizes the difficulty faced by Husserl in distinguishing phenomenology from descriptive psychology, so that – even if one rejects Husserl’s solution – two important lessons can be drawn from the comparison. First, what matters in both cases is not the subject-matter – the intentional structures, entities, relations, processes etc. – focused on, but *how* questions about it are being answered. In other words, the choice of subject-matter does not in itself suffice to distinguish phenomenology as a transcendental mode of enquiry. (That is why Husserl could later take various intentional structures – e.g. subjectivity, intersubjectivity, the lifeworld – as starting points for enquiry without compromising his transcendentalist ambitions.³⁷) Second, a minimal requirement for phenomenology to be transcendental is therefore that it provides some (other) way of sustaining the distinction between transcendental and empirical claims. For Husserl the former have a distinctive validity, as apriori necessary claims, that his method of phenomenological reduction and free variation is designed to justify. The remaining question is whether Merleau-Ponty also has some way of making sense of and underwriting a distinction between transcendental and empirical modes of enquiry.

2.2 Merleau-Ponty on the reduction

The *Preface* of the *Phenomenology* provides Merleau-Ponty’s most prominent discussion of the phenomenological reduction. One of four tensions identified as making ‘phenomenology’ difficult to define is that this label is applied both to transcendental philosophy that brackets the natural attitude, and to attempts to found philosophy by returning to the pretheoretical world that is ‘always “already there”’.³⁸ Following his general strategy in this *Preface*, Merleau-Ponty attempts to reconcile

insightfully highlighting parallels between some of Merleau-Ponty’s arguments and those of traditional transcendental idealists, particularly Kant’s treatment of the antinomies. My concern here is whether Merleau-Ponty succeeds in identifying conditions that are – as Gardner (2015, p. 300) puts it – ‘in the true and genuine sense transcendental, i.e. *a priori* and necessary, and non-identical with empirical, contingent or mundane states of affairs’.

³⁶ E.g. Clark (1998).

³⁷ Each structure serves as an entry point in studying the transcendental field in which they are embedded. As Zahavi (2003, p. 76) puts it, it ‘does not matter which of the three one takes as a starting point, for one will still be inevitably led to the other two’.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. i).

these antithetical claims by allowing that both make sense and showing how they are dialectically related. This attempt leads him to say some puzzling things about the phenomenological reduction, in particular that, having long struggled to understand its full implications, Husserl himself came to recognize that ‘the main lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction’.³⁹

Given this claim, it is not obvious whether or not Merleau-Ponty accepts the reduction as part of his philosophical method. While he is clearly suggesting the reduction fails in some way(s), this is not to fail completely. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on lived experience and (at least apparent) reliance on empirical science seem to require rejection of the reduction.⁴⁰ Yet at the same time, as we shall see, occasional comments in the *Phenomenology* suggest he thinks his practice is consistent with the reduction when properly understood. I suggest the best way to make sense of Merleau-Ponty’s position is to recognize that he is using the word ‘reduction’ in a different way from Husserl. More precisely, Merleau-Ponty rejects the ‘phenomenological reduction’ in Husserl’s sense, but reinterprets the term so that it applies to an analogous operation that *does* characterize his own approach, while giving the (somewhat misleading) impression of seamless continuity with Husserl.⁴¹

To appreciate this, consider what it means to say that ‘complete’ reduction is impossible. Note first that in Husserl’s terms this is a strange claim to make. In *Ideas I* (§§30-31) the natural attitude is defined in terms of a ‘general thesis’, a pervasive background assumption that the world exists (although any particular feature of the world may not). It is precisely this underlying assumption of the world’s existence that is ‘bracketed’ in the phenomenological epoché.⁴² Thus Husserl’s concern is with a general attitude, applying to the world as a whole, and this ‘general thesis’ is *either* in force (the world is taken to exist) *or* – under the reduction – it is not (the world’s

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. viii). Cf. Merleau-Ponty (1964, pp. 142, 154). He also claims the reduction is best characterized as a sense of ‘surprise’ (*étonnement*) before the world once we step back from our usual immersion and engagement in it (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. viii). – Despite resonating with Aristotle’s or Plato’s suggestion that philosophy starts with wonder, and its suspension of everyday concerns, this formulation bears no resemblance to most of Husserl’s pronouncements about the reduction. For one interpretation of this as an affective attitude, see Heinämaa (1999).

⁴⁰ Romdenh-Romluc (2011, pp. 28-35) suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s method is broadly empirical and scientific while requiring the ‘transcendental phenomenological reduction’ (p. 21). In Husserl’s terms this is impossible.

⁴¹ Naturally this invites the charge of ‘equivocation’. However, although Merleau-Ponty might have explained his differences with Husserl more clearly, his approach coheres with his conception of authentic speech – as taking up and reinterpreting sedimented past language – and the productive ambiguity of a philosopher’s intellectual legacy (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1960, pp. 198-202).

⁴² Husserl (1976, p. 65 [§32]).

existence is bracketed). Reduction is thus an all-or-nothing matter, with no provision for a partial or gradual phenomenological reduction that could remain ‘incomplete’.⁴³

What, then, does *Merleau-Ponty* mean in saying that ‘complete’ reduction is impossible? The suggestion is presumably that we can attempt to perform the reduction, as Husserl prescribes, but that this attempt reveals certain features which resist the operation. Merleau-Ponty states that for an absolute constituting subject performing the reduction would be unproblematic, but that concrete embodied agents face two principled problems. The first, the ‘problem of others’, is that interacting with others reveals both that we have an outside and that others have an interiority and opacity marking the limits of our supposed constituting powers.⁴⁴

This leads Merleau-Ponty to the second problem, the ‘problem of the world’, on which I will concentrate here. Attempting the reduction, he suggests, leads us to discover the world as a permanent presence that permeates and defines the body, something that must be assumed to exist by embodied agents.⁴⁵ This is a pervasive theme of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. For example, while acknowledging that we might doubt particular experiences or lack particular sensory fields, Merleau-Ponty insists that a subject cannot lack the integral background of the world, ‘this affirmation that is made in us at each moment’ or the ‘invariable framework of all illusion and disillusion’.⁴⁶ The world, as the ‘horizon of all horizons’, is the object of a ‘primordial’ or ‘original’ ‘faith’ inherent in prereflective ‘lived’ experience and is therefore prior to any attitude developed at a reflective level.⁴⁷ Thus Merleau-Ponty holds not only that embodied agents are defined by interaction with the world, nor simply that the world’s existence cannot be denied or doubted (attitudes Husserl distinguishes from the reduction). Rather, his position is that the world’s *existence* is presupposed by any reflective attitude – including bracketing or the phenomenological reduction.⁴⁸ These comments entail that Merleau-Ponty’s position is incompatible with performance of the reduction in Husserl’s sense: the ‘general thesis’ defining the natural attitude cannot be bracketed because bracketing is a

⁴³ As Husserl (1954, p. 153 [§40]) highlights in the *Crisis*.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. vi).

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. vi-viii). Cf. Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 21).

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 379, 397, cf. p. 413 f.).

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 381, 468, 371 f.).

⁴⁸ The ‘certitudes of common sense and of the natural attitude’ are ‘presupposed by all thinking’ (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. viii); ‘it is at least certain for us that there are things, i.e. a world. To ask whether the world is real is not to understand what one is saying’ (Merleau-Ponty 1976, pp. viii, 396; cf. similarly Merleau-Ponty 1960, p. 206 f.).

reflective operation that is possible only against the background of an insuppressible – prereflective, pretheoretical, prepredicative – commitment to the world’s existence.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty continues to talk affirmatively of phenomenological ‘reduction’ on occasion. Most notably, his discussion of ‘motivation’ in Chapter 3 of the *Introduction* to the *Phenomenology* twice enigmatically hints that correctly understanding the philosophical implications of Gestalt psychology would amount to a ‘true phenomenological reduction’ [*une véritable réduction phénoménologique*]:

critique of the constancy hypothesis, if carried through to the end, takes on the value of a true ‘phenomenological reduction’

Gestalt theory lacks a renewal of categories [...] to attain this it is necessary to question the objective thought of logic and of classical philosophy, to suspend [*mettre en suspens*] the categories of the world [...] and proceed to a true ‘phenomenological reduction’⁵⁰

As the second quote makes clear, Merleau-Ponty is here highlighting the need to abstain from what he calls ‘Objective Thought’ – the idea that the world (real or intelligible) is a fully determinate whole – and to develop new concepts that better describe the inherent workings of perception. We should note the complication that in both passages the expression ‘phenomenological reduction’ is in quotation marks. Why is this? Perhaps these are scare quotes, intended to signal distance from Husserl’s term and its semantics; perhaps Merleau-Ponty is using them to introduce the term in defining it.

Despite this complication, it is not difficult to see how Merleau-Ponty has reinterpreted Husserl’s phenomenological reduction. On the one hand, there is a clear parallel between Merleau-Ponty’s recommendation and Husserl’s epoché. Abstaining from objective thought means for Merleau-Ponty not assuming a world of fully constituted objects, holding back from the attitude of judgement (predication) and its positing of objects. Hence, a direct analogy with Husserl’s phenomenological reduction is that both generally suspend or bracket the positing of objects. On the

⁴⁹ Against this, Joel Smith argues that the epoché is a second-order act performed on first-order judgement, ruling out conflict with the ‘nongognitive’ notion of *être au monde*, and that Merleau-Ponty ‘accepts and puts into practice [...] the epoché’ (Smith 2005, pp. 559, 554). However, it is difficult to see Merleau-Ponty accepting a cognitive/nongognitive dichotomy, given his general opposition to dualisms and over-intellectualization, together with the foundational role he assigns the prepredicative realm. It is also difficult to see him seeking to salvage the epoché at the level of judgement, given his general determination to shift focus away from this level. – I explain below in what sense Merleau-Ponty can be seen, as Smith discerns, as accepting and practicing a (revised) form of the epoché.

⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 58, 60). The ‘constancy hypothesis’ is the assumption of a 1:1 correspondence between the functioning of sense organs and the objective world (ibid., p. 14).

other hand, abstaining from objective thought to study preobjective or prepredicative ‘lived’ experience, is precisely how Merleau-Ponty characterizes his own method of phenomenology in the *Preface*. Hence, as used in the above quotes, the term ‘phenomenological reduction’ accurately describes Merleau-Ponty’s intended method. Particularly significant is the fact that, understood in this revised sense, it becomes possible to see how phenomenological reduction can be incomplete or partial. For the implication of Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion is that although we must affirm the world’s existence in our prereflective experience, it is possible to suspend affirmation of ‘objective’ categories at the reflective level of philosophy.

To sum up, it is an oversimplification to say without further qualification either that Merleau-Ponty accepts or that he rejects ‘the’ phenomenological reduction. If taken in Husserl’s sense, Merleau-Ponty’s views are incompatible with the reduction, and in this sense he must be taken to reject it. Conversely, if interpreted in the revised way just outlined, it is possible to see how Merleau-Ponty’s ‘true’ sense of ‘phenomenological reduction’ (a) is directly analogous to Husserl’s use of the term, (b) characterizes Merleau-Ponty’s own method precisely, and (c) admits the claim that reduction can be ‘incomplete’.⁵¹ – For my purposes in this paper, however, it is important to note that by rejecting and reinterpreting Husserl’s epoché in this way Merleau-Ponty denies himself the central means that Husserl relied on to make sense of the idea that phenomenology is a transcendental discipline.

2.3 Merleau-Ponty on the transcendental field

Merleau-Ponty connects the ideas just discussed – ‘critique of the constancy hypothesis and more generally the reduction of the “world” idea’ – with the opening up of what he calls the ‘*phenomenal field*’.⁵² This ‘phenomenal field’ comprises whatever appears to/for embodied agents in interaction with their surroundings, encompassing both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ events and objects.⁵³ Merleau-Ponty further suggests that study of the phenomenal field, specifically in gestalt psychology, is continuous with transcendental philosophy. In his words, ‘the transcendental attitude is already implied in the psychologist’s descriptions’ so that the ‘the

⁵¹ As Carman (2008, p. 39) observes, despite considering them ‘strictly speaking impossible’, Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to ‘find something valuable’ in the transcendental and eidetic reductions ‘leads him to characterize them in ways that depart widely from Husserl’s account.’

⁵² Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 66).

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 71n).

phenomenal field becomes [the] transcendental field'.⁵⁴ The reasoning behind this is that because the objects we become aware of belong to the phenomenal field, it is here that intentional objects are constituted, so that (gestalt) 'psychology is always led to the problem of the constitution of the world'.⁵⁵

The term 'transcendental field' clearly echoes Husserl's talk of the 'transcendental field of experience'.⁵⁶ Despite the shared terminology, however, there are again several differences. First and foremost, Merleau-Ponty's transcendental field remains tied to and conditioned by its starting point: philosophical reflection 'itself shares in the facticity of the unreflected'.⁵⁷ This contrasts sharply with Husserl, for whom the point of the reduction is to liberate philosophical enquiry from the contingencies of its starting point. As a result, for Merleau-Ponty the transcendental field – just as embodied subjectivity – is characterized by opacity and a form of incompleteness. Our awareness of the world is always to be at its most determinate in a lived present, which is surrounded by 'horizons' of past and future of which we are only vaguely aware. And while we have similarly experienced or will experience parts of these intentional horizons, Merleau-Ponty argues that the situated (perspectival) character of embodied consciousness makes the ideal of a complete view – a simultaneous awareness or presence – of the intentional world incoherent.⁵⁸ Thus the intentional world, on Merleau-Ponty's view, is infinite in principle but finite in fact.⁵⁹ These differences – facticity, opacity, incompleteness – might be summed up by saying that Merleau-Ponty replaces Husserl's ideal of pure phenomena with the reality of impure consciousness. Indeed, he even claims the reason for talking 'of a transcendental *field*' is precisely that 'reflection never has the entire world in its sight [...] and that it only ever has at its disposal a partial view and a limited power'.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 72, 73). Merleau-Ponty's commitment to the term 'transcendental' is not initially obvious, and the above passage might seem to be resisting a 'transcendental' idealist interpretation of gestalt psychology (cf. Langer 1989, p. 19). Although Merleau-Ponty often uses the term in relation to transcendental idealism or a transcendental Ego, both of which he clearly opposes, he also claims the 'descriptive method' is legitimate only 'from the transcendental point of view' (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 13n) and later clearly applies the term to his own view of the transcendental field (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1976, pp. 413, 418, 466).

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 73).

⁵⁶ Husserl (1950, p. 66).

⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 74).

⁵⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 382-5 and 81-86).

⁵⁹ As he ingeniously describes it, the temporalization of presence combines 'a principled immanence' and 'a factual transcendence': 'in this transcendental field [...], I have in principle a sort of ubiquity and eternity' (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 418).

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 74).

The phenomenal field, thus understood, becomes the basis of a new form of (non-‘intellectualist’) reflection that Merleau-Ponty sees himself practising. In characterizing this mode of enquiry at various points throughout the *Phenomenology* he reinterprets or revises several concepts – or conceptual pairings – that have traditionally been central in defining ‘transcendental’ approaches. One such move is to deny a dichotomy between empirical and nonempirical (‘philosophical’) enquiry. Thus, insofar as phenomenological reflection is directed to the factically conditioned phenomenal field, Merleau-Ponty denies there is ‘an essential difference’ between ‘truths of fact and truths of reason [...] there is no truth of reason that does not retain a coefficient of facticity’.⁶¹ Accordingly, he also rejects a strict contraposition of transcendental and empirical perspectives. For example, in discussing a proposed intellectualist explanation of Schneider’s motility, Merleau-Ponty states ‘the distinction between empirical usage and transcendental usage masks the difficulty rather than resolving it’ and instead advocates a genetic phenomenological approach.⁶²

Particularly important for my purposes here is that Merleau-Ponty suggests revised interpretations of three concepts characterizing the modality of his own claims. First, he proposes a ‘new definition’ of the apriori. Having insisted that the phenomenal field comprising the object of his studies is factically conditioned, he acknowledges that ‘there is no longer any means of distinguishing a level of apriori truths and a level of factual truths’.⁶³ Instead, Merleau-Ponty sees these two kinds of truth as being on the ‘same level’ with an ‘apriori’ truth making some fact or logical implications ‘explicit’, whereas ‘a posteriori’ truths concern facts that are ‘isolated and implicit’.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 451). Similarly Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 159). Thus Merleau-Ponty rejects a traditional strategy for delimiting philosophical truths from other modes of enquiry. See, for example, Leibniz’s ‘truths [...] of reasoning and those of fact’ (Leibniz 1982, p. 40), Hume’s ‘relations of ideas’ and ‘matters of fact’ (Hume 1999, p. 108), or the more recent contrasting of conceptual and empirical truths.

⁶² Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 150, 147). Similarly, ‘The Philosopher and his Shadow’ claims that a transcendental attitude cannot be radically distinguished from the natural attitude due to our original unbracketable faith in the world’s existence (Merleau-Ponty 1960, p. 207). Perhaps this is why Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 76) at one point simply glosses ‘transcendental’ as ‘radical’. – Incidentally, it is not obvious how to understand this proposal, as empirical and transcendental claims presumably have mutually exclusive modalities (necessary/apriori and contingent/aposteriori).

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 255).

⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 256).

Second, Merleau-Ponty claims that ‘human existence obliges us to revise our usual notion of necessity and of contingency’.⁶⁵ This obligation results from Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to balance two claims about the human body. On the one hand, he sees the human body as governed by ‘internal’ not ‘external’ relations, i.e. as a functionally interconnected sensorimotoric and cognitive whole, rather than a merely accidental assembly of mechanical parts. On the other hand, he recognizes that human bodies might differ (e.g. by lacking various parts/organs) and are shaped by natural and socio-cultural history. As a result, he claims, ‘it is impossible to distinguish in the total being of the human a bodily organization that one could treat as a contingent fact, and other predicates that belong to it with necessity’.⁶⁶ Although he says little about the revisions required, it is clear that claims about the constitution of human bodies or the phenomenal field cannot, for Merleau-Ponty, cast off facticity. Hence, any so-called ‘necessity’ will be a conditioned necessity, determined by contingent underlying facts. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: ‘The unity of the senses, which passed for an apriori truth, is nothing more than the formal expression of a fundamental contingency’, or more succinctly ‘change makes itself [*se fait*] reason’.⁶⁷

A third and final revision I want to highlight is that in several passages Merleau-Ponty suggests that talking of ‘conditions of possibility’ – the expression characteristically linked with transcendental claims – is an intellectualist trait and that his own interest is in conditions of ‘actuality’ or ‘reality’.⁶⁸ For example:

Intellectualist consciousness does not get as far as this living cluster of perception because it is looking for the conditions which make it *possible* or without which it would not be, instead of uncovering the operation which makes it *actual* [*actuelle*].⁶⁹

Similarly, he warns against returning to ‘the method of “that without which” and to reflective analysis of the classic type, which searches for conditions of possibility without occupying itself with conditions of reality [*conditions de réalité*]’.⁷⁰ By contrast, Merleau-Ponty suggests, ‘phenomenology is a phenomenology, that is to say

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 199).

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 198). Such as, for example, Kant’s distinction of contingent sensibility from the necessities of the understanding.

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 255, 197).

⁶⁸ Or ‘conditions effectives’ (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 236). These reservations are anticipated in *The Structure of Behaviour* (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 239 f.) and reiterated in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 68). – Note, however, that Merleau-Ponty is not completely consistent in this respect and himself sometimes apparently addresses questions of the form ‘how is ... possible?’ and talks in his own voice of ‘conditions of possibility’ (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 490).

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 48).

⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 501).

studies the *appearance* of being to consciousness, instead of supposing its possibility to be given in advance'.⁷¹

3 Is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology 'transcendental'?

We are now better placed to assess whether Merleau-Ponty should be considered a 'transcendental' phenomenologist. First, it should now be clear that several quick answers to this question will not suffice. For example, it is not settled by observing that Merleau-Ponty sometimes applies the term 'transcendental' his own position. Nor does it suffice that Merleau-Ponty's position can be made to sound like Husserl's phenomenology. Admittedly, both authors emphasize the perspective of consciousness, and in both cases one might be tempted to say the respective form of 'reduction' secures for investigation a 'transcendental field' in which intentional objects are constituted. But in saying this, terminological convergences mask (perhaps deliberately on Merleau-Ponty's part) underlying differences in the respective positions. Moreover, it seems clear that Merleau-Ponty *intended* to present his position as continuous with Husserl's, as both a version of phenomenology and a new kind of 'transcendental' position.⁷² Nonetheless, given his significant revisions of Husserl's key concepts, the important question is whether Merleau-Ponty can meet what I have called the transcendentalist challenge.

In this respect the above comparison of Merleau-Ponty's views with Husserl's yields several lessons. First, the choice of specific subject-matter – including subjectivity or consciousness – is insufficient to define a claim as transcendental. Rather, transcendental claims are distinguished by a specific modality – traditionally, as with Husserl, necessity and apriority. Second, the incompatibility of his position with Husserl's phenomenological reduction means that Merleau-Ponty denies himself the means by which phenomenology was to secure the modality proper to transcendental claims. The key question therefore becomes whether Merleau-Ponty has proposed a viable alternative that secures the modality of transcendental claims.

Consider first his 'revised' conception of the apriori as making explicit facts or logical implications, as opposed to the 'isolated and implicit' facts of the 'a posteriori'. It is difficult to make any sense of this proposal. On the one hand, it is not

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 74).

⁷² The *Phenomenology of Perception* is surely intended to meet the need identified at the end of *The Structure of Behaviour* to 'redefine transcendental philosophy' while integrating it with the 'phenomenon of the real' (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 241).

clear what ‘a posteriori’ means here. Assuming Merleau-Ponty means by this a posteriori judgements (what else can he mean?), then presumably this – qua judgement – involves making something explicit rather than leaving it ‘implicit’. It is also difficult to know what an ‘isolated’ fact is supposed to be, as any fact we are aware of presupposes either the use of concepts that inferentially/rationally integrate it into our understanding of the world or – perhaps more immediately for Merleau-Ponty – a holistic background of practical engagement with the world. On the other hand, nor is it clear what ‘apriori’ means. Merleau-Ponty cannot claim an ‘apriori’ judgement picks out something antecedent or prior to it, as this would be to relapse into the habit of objective thought by assuming the determinacy of acts of thought or expression to be ‘external’ to them.⁷³ Yet for Merleau-Ponty the feat of any act of reflective awareness is to take up and impose greater determinacy on an indeterminate (‘ambiguous’) ground or prestructuration.⁷⁴ – Perhaps this failure to define the two opposing poles is not surprising, given that Merleau-Ponty’s main interest, as he states, is in denying a principled difference between the apriori and a posteriori ‘levels’. In Merleau-Ponty’s defence, one might suggest his revised distinction aims to track the difference between two kinds of cognitive operation, those focusing on either the observation of particular facts or how specific facts are connected with others. Nonetheless, while some such distinction might be useful, it has little to do with the apriori/a posteriori contrast, and cannot in any case be understood in the way Merleau-Ponty’s brief comments suggest.

Merleau-Ponty’s revision of the necessary/contingent opposition is also problematic. In allowing that claims about the human body or the phenomenal field are conditioned or determined by contingent facts, Merleau-Ponty has effectively given up the idea of necessity. While it is clear that he wants to make constitutive claims – say about the constitution of intentional structures – these must be understood as descriptive statements of (empirically) conditioned facts. That is, while he can tell us about ‘what it is to be’ these things, how they in fact are, he can offer no justification for claiming things must be this way.⁷⁵

⁷³ Cf. his comment that the fact we can reflectively find geometric relations in spatial awareness does not mean they were ‘already there’ (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 337).

⁷⁴ Since ‘thought itself’ is the ‘passage from the undetermined to the determined’ (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 39).

⁷⁵ Indeed, one of the faults Merleau-Ponty attributes to the intellectualist is claiming to infer what is the case from what they believe is necessary (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 74).

Another way of formulating the last point is to say that with Merleau-Ponty ‘how possible’ claims have no force beyond that of ‘how is’ claims. This is why, I suggest, he expresses reservations about the ‘conditions of possibility’ label and suggests talking instead of conditions of ‘actuality’ or ‘reality’.⁷⁶ This is a very significant change – and it seems to me Merleau-Ponty’s most tenable characterization of his position’s modality. In relying on the idea of ‘making ... possible’ transcendental philosophical approaches hold out the promise of some kind of (philosophical) explanation, rather than merely description, of the target phenomena. They intimate, so to speak, that we can dig below the surface of appearances and uncover a reconstructible rational order that generated (‘made possible’) the target phenomena. However, Merleau-Ponty’s inclination to speak of ‘conditions of actuality’ suggests his aims are more modest. One way of capturing this would be to say he limits himself (as a good phenomenologist) to description rather than explanation. This would see him as drawing attention to (‘making explicit’) unnoticed features of the actual world, or redescribing features we are already aware of, but not as explaining or justifying them. Another way of putting it would be to say he is modally modest, that his aim is to uncover how things are rather than how they might be or must be, or that his focus is on actuality rather than possibility or necessity.

The conclusion required by the preceding considerations is that Merleau-Ponty does not succeed in redefining traditional modal concepts, and hence in defining the distinctive validity of transcendental claims. However, given that Merleau-Ponty says little about the modality of his claims, one might worry that this conclusion is uncharitable, placing undue weight on comments peripheral to his main concerns. This worry can be overcome by recognizing that these comments reflect a fundamental disagreement between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty over the explanatory relationship between the actual and the possible, one affecting the nature of phenomenological claims and underlying the differences set out above in section 2. On the one hand, Husserl holds that actuality is grounded in possibilities, that the real or actual world can be understood as a part of a larger realm of empirically unconditioned possibilities – so to speak, as the actual tip of the iceberg of possibility.

⁷⁶ In this respect, Merleau-Ponty shares the convictions that Rorty (1991, p. 55) sees as basic to naturalism that ‘*anything* might have been otherwise, that there can be no conditionless conditions [...] and that there is no such thing as a noncausal condition of possibility.’

This view underlies his belief that by exploring the space of pure possibilities phenomenology can make apriori and necessary claims about the constitution of the actual world. As Husserl puts it, “‘in itself’ the science of pure possibilities is prior to that of actual realities and makes this [science of actual realities] possible as a science.’”⁷⁷ Thus not only (as highlighted above) is Husserl’s method attuned to the logic of transcendental claims, but so too is the capacity of phenomenology to make transcendental claims inscribed in and underwritten by Husserl’s overall view of the (modal) nature of intentionality. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty reverses Husserl’s order of explanatory priority and conceives possibility as grounded in the actual. On his view possibilities exist only through an agent’s cognitive abilities to break free from the actual and project before it ‘a free space’ and so to ‘situate itself in the virtual’.⁷⁸ Thus possibilities (‘the virtual’) are not conceivable independently of the real, but as embedded in, and as specific variations on, what’s real.⁷⁹ In this perspective, attempting to justify necessary apriori claims by appealing to supposedly pure possibilities simply makes no sense, as all possibilities are always empirically conditioned and hence grounded in contingency.

This shift from the primacy of the possible to the primacy of the actual underlies Merleau-Ponty’s attempts to redefine the modal concepts applied to phenomenology. And although Merleau-Ponty says little, and may not have given the matter much thought, his limited success in revising these concepts accurately reflects the implications of this shift. It is not simply that Merleau-Ponty happens not to re-define these modal terms convincingly; rather, he cannot do so, given his commitment to the primacy of the actual. For, just as Husserl’s whole position was attuned to making transcendental claims, Merleau-Ponty’s overall picture of ontology and intentionality conspires to exclude them by undermining the assumptions about modality defining such claims. Thus, while Husserl’s position can be seen as the

⁷⁷ Husserl (1950, p. 106 [§34]). – See also his claim that the “old ontological doctrine that knowledge of ‘possibilities’ must precede that of actual realities [*Wirklichkeiten*], is in my view, as long as it is correctly understood and made use of in the right way, a prodigious truth” (Husserl 1976, p. 178 [§79]).

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1976, pp. 129, 126). This is the general capacity that the *Phenomenology* suggests Schneider lacks. According to *The Structure of Behaviour* animal behaviour also lacks this ability, while the ‘capacity to orient oneself in relation to the possible’ is characteristic of the human dialectic with its surroundings (Merleau-Ponty 2002, pp. 128 f., 190). The significance of this general capacity is nicely highlighted by Romdenh-Romluc (2007).

⁷⁹ As the world’s ‘ontological contingency’ is ‘radical’, Merleau-Ponty explains, the ‘world is the real, of which the necessary and the possible are merely provinces’ (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. 456; cf. similarly Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 148). Hence, the ‘eidetic method is that of a phenomenological positivism that founds the possible on the real’ (Merleau-Ponty 1976, p. xii). This primacy of the actual is again echoed in Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 148).

model for a consistently worked out transcendental phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology stands opposed as deeply and pervasively anti-transcendental.

The obvious objection at this point is that this shows only that Merleau-Ponty is not a *Husserlian* transcendental phenomenologist. Why not – given his appropriation of traditional transcendentalist terminology and tropes – interpret his position as a modified or ‘weak’ version of transcendental philosophy? One reason not to do this is that in *attempting* to redefine traditional modal terms, Merleau-Ponty implicitly recognizes that transcendental claims are defined by their modality as apriori necessary claims. He should therefore be seen either as failing by his own lights to meet the requirements of transcendental philosophy, or as failing to appreciate fully his own position's implications on those requirements. A second is that, given Merleau-Ponty's commitment to the primacy of the actual, attempting to ground or explain the possibility of the actual/real world through something apriori and necessary simply gets matters the wrong way round. His position hence stands opposed not only to Husserl's variant of transcendentalism, but to any position defining transcendental claims as apriori and necessary – which encompasses not only traditional post-Kantian positions, but arguably many transcendental claims even today.

It is no doubt true, however, that the word ‘transcendental’ is used in various ways, sometimes perhaps as merely a catch-all term for claims resisting reductive naturalism.⁸⁰ One might therefore think Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology makes ‘weak’ transcendental claims in the sense that their validity is precisely not modally defined by necessity and apriority. However, this move would not obviously help in Merleau-Ponty's case for two reasons. First, to reiterate, his attempts to redefine the modal terms traditionally linked with transcendental claims suggests he is not challenging their role in defining the validity of transcendental claims. However, it may be thought that, despite not introducing new terminology, these attempted redefinitions are most charitably read as the attempt to define a distinct kind of weak transcendental validity. In that case, second, the important consideration is that the problem with Merleau-Ponty's attempted redefinitions is not his terminology, but that they fail to yield intelligible distinctions, and so fail to define a distinctively transcendental mode of validity. This means we are back where we started. The

⁸⁰ For an illustration of this variety see Chase/Reynolds (2010, p. 37 f.).

willingness to interpret Merleau-Ponty's position as a modified or weak transcendentalism in no way dispenses with the transcendentalist challenge, that of identifying a distinctive kind of (weakly) transcendental validity and making clear how this can be grounded phenomenologically. It is this challenge, I am claiming, that Merleau-Ponty fails to meet satisfactorily.

So much, then, for my argument that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is not 'transcendental'. I want to finish by briefly commenting on two closely related matters. First, arguing that Merleau-Ponty's position cannot be properly considered transcendental is not to claim it is a 'naturalist' one. This follows only if it is assumed there is no alternative to the dualist opposition of transcendentalism and naturalism. Yet why think – given his rejection of the empirical/transcendental contraposition – that Merleau-Ponty's position is any closer to naturalism than to transcendentalism? In any case, whether or in what sense Merleau-Ponty is a naturalist is a separate and potentially complex question, about which I am here remaining largely agnostic. All I want to suggest here is that the preceding considerations remove one significant barrier to constructive dialogue between phenomenology and science. If phenomenology is assumed to make necessary apriori claims about what makes intentionality (say) possible, it might appear there is a modal gap separating these from scientific claims. Yet Merleau-Ponty's commitment to the primacy of actual brings his phenomenology closer to scientific approaches, which also make claims about how it is possible – in the actual, causally effective world – for particular things to exist or events to occur.⁸¹ So while Merleau-Ponty makes claims with different content, reached by different methods, and justified in different ways, there is no intimation of a basic modal gap between his phenomenology and science. I see this as an advantage of his view, because it facilitates constructive dialogue with scientific positions (as exemplified in Merleau-Ponty's own work) rather than insinuating that philosophy and science are incommensurable in the way others – Husserl and Heidegger, say – appear to.

Of course, a dialogue requires two distinct voices. Yet one might think, second, that unless it is somehow 'transcendental' phenomenology will become, against its core motivations, the handmaid of the sciences. The concern is that if its

⁸¹ The absence of such a modal gap underlies the possibility – emphasized by Zahavi (2004, pp. 338-340; 2013, pp. 24 ff.) and Gallagher (2012) – of constructive dialogue between science and Husserl's 'phenomenological psychology'.

task is simply describing or interpreting features of lived experience, all genuine explanation falls to science, so that the only priority phenomenology could claim is epistemic or genetic. In that case, however, phenomenology would arguably be of little philosophical importance. Against this, it should be noted that Merleau-Ponty himself preserves a distinct role for phenomenology over against science.⁸² For him descriptions of lived experience allowed the conceptual assumptions ('objective thinking') underlying gestalt psychology to be challenged. Similarly, his use of Schneider as a contrast case highlighting the capacities normally exhibited by engaged agents was central to his critique of biological and psychological theories of human intelligence. However, this corrective force does not require necessary and apriori 'transcendental' claims. All Merleau-Ponty needs are phenomenological claims, in the sense of descriptive claims about the contingent constitution of lived experience. After all, empirical psychology aims to explain the abilities that agents manifest in such experience. This is not to claim that all sciences must cohere with lived experience in this way – physics, for example, is presumably free to reconceive many entities it studies in 'counterintuitive' ways. Merleau-Pontian phenomenology cannot therefore claim to be a philosophical master discipline with the authority to silence the voice of science. But for features of the world with an essential experiential aspect, such as those that interest Merleau-Ponty, particularly psychological states, description of lived experience functions as an irreducible constraint on scientific conceptions of them.⁸³ In such cases even a nontranscendental phenomenology can play the role traditionally assigned to phenomenology of identifying or defining the explanandum for empirical scientific research.⁸⁴

References

Baldwin, Thomas. 2004. Editor's Introduction. In *Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin, 1-31. London/New York: Routledge.

⁸² I think a strength of his view is to preserve the distinctness of phenomenological claims, as noninferentially verified descriptions of lived experience (Inkpin 2016, pp. 6-11). Despite agreeing generally about the complementarity – e.g. mutual constraint and results continuity – between phenomenology and science, it seems to me that Reynolds (2106) goes a little too far in seeing phenomenological claims as differing in 'degree' from science and (qua phenomenological claims) being open to scientific challenge.

⁸³ On the ability of nontranscendental phenomenology to do this in the case of language see Inkpin (2016, pp. 9-11 and 308-313).

⁸⁴ I would like to thank Jack Reynolds and Marguerite La Caze for comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am also particularly grateful to Sebastian Gardner and Sarah Richmond for detailed comments, robust criticism, and discussion of the views developed here.

- Baldwin, Thomas. 2013. Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Critique of Natural Science. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 72: 189-219.
- Bell, David. 1990. *Husserl*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Brentano, Franz. 1995. *Descriptive Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Carman, Taylor. 2008. *Merleau-Ponty*. London: Routledge.
- Chase, James and Reynolds, Jack. 2010. The Fate of Transcendental Reasoning in Contemporary Philosophy. In *Postanalytic and Metacontinental*, eds Jack Reynolds, James Chase, James Williams, and Edwin Mares, 27-52. London/New York: Continuum.
- Clark, Andy. 1998. *Being There. Putting Brain, Body and the World Together Again*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1993. *La voix et le phénomène*, Paris: Quadrige/PUF.
- Gallagher, Shaun. 2012. On the Possibility of Naturalizing Phenomenology. In *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi, 71-93. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, Sebastian. 2015. Merleau-Ponty's Transcendental Theory of Perception. In *The Transcendental Turn*, eds Mark Sacks, Sebastian Gardner and Matthew Grist, 294-323. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heinämaa, Sara. 1999. Merleau-Ponty's Modification of Phenomenology: Cognition, Passion and Philosophy. *Synthese* 118: 49-68.
- Hume, David. 1999. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1950. *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge, Husserliana I*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1954. *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie, Husserliana VI*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1968. *Phänomenologische Psychologie. Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1925, Husserliana IX*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1976. *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie, Husserliana III/1*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1987. Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft. In *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1911-1921), Husserliana XXV*, 3-62. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1989. Phänomenologie und Anthropologie. In *Aufsätze und Vorträge (1922-1937), Husserliana XXVII*, 164-181. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Inkipin, Andrew. 2016. *Disclosing the World. On the Phenomenology of Language*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1983. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft, Werke*, vols 3-4, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Kern, Iso. 1977. The Three Ways to the Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction in the Philosophy of Edmund Husserl. In *Husserl. Expositions and Appraisals*, eds Frederick Elliston and Peter McCormick, 126-149. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Langer, Monica. 1989. *Merleau-Ponty's 'Phenomenology of Perception'. A Guide and Commentary*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Leibniz, Gottfried W. 1982. *Vernunftprinzipien der Natur und der Gnade; Monadologie*. Hamburg: Meiner.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1960. Le philosophe et son ombre. In *Éloge de la philosophie (et autres essais)*, 199-235. Paris: Gallimard.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. *Le visible et l'invisible*. Paris: Gallimard.

- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1968. *Résumés de cours. Collège de France 1952-1960*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1976. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2002. *La structure du comportement*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Romdenh-Romluc, Komarine. 2007. Merleau-Ponty and the Power to Reckon with the Possible. In *Reading Merleau-Ponty. On the Phenomenology of Perception*, ed. Thomas Baldwin, 44-58. London/New York: Routledge.
- Romdenh-Romluc, Komarine. 2011. *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Merleau-Ponty*. London: Routledge.
- Reynolds, Jack. 2016. Phenomenology and Naturalism: A Hybrid and Heretical Proposal. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24: 393-412.
- Rorty, Richard. 1991. The Reification of Language. In *Essays on Heidegger and Other, Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, 50-65. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1966. *La transcendance de l'ego*. Paris: Vrin.
- Smith, Joel. 2005. Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenological Reduction. *Inquiry* 48: 553-571.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2002. Merleau-Ponty on Husserl: A Reappraisal. In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, eds. Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree, 3-29. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2003. *Husserl's Phenomenology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2004. Phenomenology and the Project of Naturalization. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 3: 331-347.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2013. Naturalized Phenomenology: A Desideratum or a Mistake. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 72: 23-42.