

Notes for a Research Project: Communication and the Phenomenological Reduction

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“Daher fordert die Philosophie: standig Kommunikation suchen, sie ruckhaltlos wagen, meine trotzige, sich in immer anderen Verkleidungen aufzwingende Selbstbehauptung hingeben, in der Hoffnung leben, dass ich mir unberechenbar wiedergeschenkt werde aus der Hingabe.” (Karl Jaspers)¹

Introduction. The topic of human communication has, in implicit or also sometimes more explicit ways, been central to philosophy practically since its beginning. From the dialogical and open nature of philosophy as the dialectical praxis it was for Socrates, to contemporary questions over the nature of intersubjectivity, of power and discourse, and attempts to base a theory of rationality on the parameters of communicative interaction, the event of speaking with each other, finding words to say what is, has been in many ways the heart of philosophy. Communication is firstly and mostly dialogue. Indeed, the “wonder in the face of the world “ (E. Fink; PP, xiii), the archè (origin, medium and end) of philosophical thinking, is itself, far from being a mute, lonely affair between me and an overpowering but silent reality, an experience of meaning, an experience of the world as having something to say to us – here, in the primordial metaphysical experience, the sublime and the beautiful have not (yet) diverged, and the anguish felt (and Wittgenstein said there comes a point in philosophy where all we can do is scream) is only that of the difficulty of finding the words to speak in the face in the world – to respond to its words, which need our response to be heard, and to be heard in their groundless upsurge. As Merleau-Ponty said, my thoughts require words to become what they are – words are not the clothes of thought, but its body. And we can add: there is no listening without speaking and no speaking without listening. In this way we might express, preliminary and in a way that will need to be substantially elaborated, the reciprocal, dialogical nature of our being with others and with the world, a nature philosophy strives to bring into view and to consciousness. Dialogue is not external to what is being spoken of, and dialogue is not external to our relation to others and to the world. Dialogue is not external to philosophy – dialogue *is* philosophy, and with the essence of dialogue the essence of philosophy – of our awareness and understanding of truth and reality, if I may put it like this for a moment – is given. We conduct a dialogue, but a dialogue also conducts, or leads, us, and will change me when I am open to the possibility of its occurrence, which I can never entirely plan or bring about willingly. Philosophy is the hope that, when I give myself up, I will be given myself back, in an incalculable way.

These are broad brush-strokes, mere colours on an empty canvas, as all meaning ‘schlechthin behauptend wie ein Orgelton’ (Ernst Bloch). I want to bring them into a unity which will hopefully allow me to articulate their meaning more fully – realising that no articulation can ever be finished;

¹ Karl Jaspers in an address to the Collegium Studiosorum ‘Veritas’, Utrecht. Quoted by W. Luijpen, p. 8.

but this is an insight that requires the elaboration in question. I want to reason about them, 'bring truth into being' (PP xx).

Why phenomenology? The present methodological landscape in philosophy is peculiar. When we are looking for a way to begin to think, when we are looking for a method to embrace when we want to think about dialogue as philosophy and philosophy as dialogue, we are confronted with a plurality of options, of choices. To a certain extent this may always have been the case, but it strikes me that today there is a level of eclecticism, of choice having penetrated right to the heart of the traditions which before long exercised such a strong grip on those whose philosophical education had taken place in them. We relate to our traditions in the style of choice. We can't say where this development will lead, but we can – and must – interpret it in many different ways. There is an economic, a cultural, a theoretical, a purely philosophical account to be given. For me, I was confronted with this choice after the formal, or perhaps speculative, notion of philosophy as communication had already taken hold in my mind. As Merleau-Ponty remarks (PP 172): 'The act of the artist or the philosopher is free, but not motiveless. Their freedom resides in the power of equivocation (...); it consists in appropriating a *de facto* situation by endowing it with a figurative meaning beyond its real one.' Thus, Marx conceived his situation as that of a middle class intellectual in the class struggle, rather than (just) that of the philosophy student and son of a lawyer. It seems to me that this *inventio* at the base of philosophy is itself already a response – a creative act at the basis of philosophy, even if the philosopher conceives his destiny as that of a contemplative acceptance of the real or of its symbolisations. I have to take up my life, I have to bring truth into being, and there is an irreducible aspect of creativity in this. We must be careful: the creative *inventio* is not a story I tell about myself, a costume I put on (as in certain late-twentieth century readings of Nietzsche) – it is *logon didonai* – the giving of a voice and an account, rationality as 'proportioned to the experiences in which it is disclosed' (PP xix). The difference between the two lies precisely in the monological story and the dialogical giving of an account. We seek a response, and we seek truth as the precarious upsurge of meaning in the giving and receiving of responses. But – and this seems crucial to me to emphasise today – a philosophical life is a life of engagement, also with a philosophy. Philosophy's universality needs a particularisation of identification on the part of the thinker. Today - and it seems to me that this is *new* - this requirement presents itself as choice, and every choice happens also in the name of what was not chosen. Our sense of tradition, indeed our appreciation of the necessity of having a tradition, a climate, a style (and Merleau-Ponty is quite explicit in this regard) to help us have our philosophies, like our languages, as a mode of inhabiting the world, is there, but is no longer naive. Faithfulness to the future of our traditions has replaced faithfulness to its origins.

Now we can make a beginning, and say that the philosophy of communication is an existential phenomenology of communication. We will analyse the phenomenological reduction, the eidetic reduction and intentionality – the three aspects of phenomenology Merleau-Ponty deals with in the Preface to PP – to show that a philosophy of communication has to be a phenomenology of communication.

The phenomenological reduction. It is only by performing the phenomenological reduction that we can come to see what communication is. At the same time, the reduction is what happens in all genuine communication. The reduction is not so much the transcendental condition of possibility of communication, but its essence. We can communicate only if we inhabit a distance between us and

our world: the world is there for me, I am in communion with it, but I do not possess it, it is inexhaustible. What holds for the world, also holds for the meaning of which the world is the incarnation, it is *en-soi-pour-nous*, it remains elusive and is given to us precisely because of, and by, that elusiveness. A withdrawal from the *natürliche Einstellung* in order to understand and heed it is what happens in dialogue. 'When I return to myself from an excursion into the realm of dogmatic common sense or of science, I find, not a source of intrinsic truth, but a subject destined to the world' (PP xi) – and we may add: destined to others (the reduction is essentially communicable). At the same time, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that the reduction is never complete. We are in the world, we reflect within the temporal flux we are trying to seize, and so there is no thought which embraces all thought (PP xiv); philosophy must always begin again, it is nothing else than the willingness to always begin again (to take another turn, as in conversations we constantly take turns).

For Husserl the phenomenological reduction is a procedure we can carry out to lay bare a field of experience which acts as a transcendental plane on which our knowledge of our normal environment and our scientific knowledge is built up. The phenomenological reduction at once assigns philosophy a well-defined place in the building of knowledge and it gives it its 'Arbeitsfeld', its area of work. The reduction, the placing between brackets of causality, of objectification and of the lifeworld and looking at them without following our natural inclination to take these things as independent reality opens up to us the interdependency and psychologically and naturalistically irreducible relation between consciousness and world. The transcendental plane is anonymous – it exists in the same way for ego and alter, and makes a shared world with empirical subjects within it possible. It brings to view the structure of the relations between subject and object, between self and world, and it does this by analysing the immediate given in phenomenological apprehension. In this way, Husserl attempts three things: to give philosophy a sound scientific basis; to rescue a philosophical, at once general and formal conception of reason (which for him is of great value in rescuing the project of modernity in the face of relativism) and to explain the natural link between lifeworld and the theories of the (natural) sciences. Merleau-Ponty, in his preface to PP, explains that Husserl's reduction is a transcendental idealism, for which intersubjectivity presents no problem since the subject co-constitutive of the subject-meaning correlation that obtains between self and world is a completely generalised subjectivity. It is important to understand that the Husserlian Cogito, although transcendental and maybe even idealist, is not solipsist – for Husserl as much as for Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty, there is no question how the contents of consciousness can represent "reality" – the nature of consciousness is to-be-with-the-world. Certainly, for Husserl this is a relation of giving meaning – *Sinngebung*² – which already Heidegger would question (and which later phenomenologists have time and again questioned), but by this implicit activity (the background *fungierende Intentionalität*) a world is constituted, not a representation of it. It is precisely in the phenomenological reduction that we become able to see this peculiar co-determination of self and world. All of this Merleau-Ponty takes over. The difference with Husserl consists in the fact that for Merleau-Ponty the reduction is not transcendental but existential. What does this mean? The transcendental reduction allows us access to the level of experience that precedes and makes possible the lifeworld with its various regional ontologies, as much as the specialised ontologies of

² 'In gewisser Art und mit einiger Vorsicht im Wortgebrauche kann man auch sagen: "Alle realen Einheiten sind 'Einheiten des Sinnes'. Sinneseinheiten setzen sinngebendes Bewusstsein voraus, das seinerseits absolut und nicht selbst wieder durch Sinngebung ist.' (*Ideen*, par. 55)

science. In a round-about way it also solves the problem of other minds. But it does so at a cost. The subjectivity it reaches is not my subjectivity, the lifeworld it speaks of is not the world of my life. The reduction, Husserl said, is never complete – the flow of life always catches up with us, I cannot reflect myself absolutely out of the world. The anxious attempt to do this, to reach the vantage point from which I am the transcendental cogito, would require a complete transparency in my self-mediation, it would require the collapse of all mediatedness, but this is never possible precisely because my access to the transcendental plane is always and constantly via the thinker I am. The phenomenological reduction throws me back upon myself, to find myself geared at a world which transcends me and to which I nevertheless belong; it shows me that all reflection is rooted in an pre-reflexive, irreflexive, brute factuality within which I as a human being emerge, and with me the world. My irreflexive experience of the world is paralleled in the phenomenological reduction by eidetic experience. The eidetic, the general formality of experience, is, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, the attempt of reflection to think irreflexive consciousness' dwelling with the world. Wonder in the face of the world – a sense of its mystery and paradox and its inexhaustible nature – is the entry to the phenomenological gaze. The reduction, as in Husserl, is something we can inhabit and come to live in. Philosophy is the attempt to do this. We discover, as did Husserl, that common sense and science are dogmatism built up on an ordinary level of experience, of being with ourselves and being with the world, which the philosopher can only describe, indicate, remind us of – it can't be explained or analysed as it is presupposed in all explanatory and analytical procedures. Philosophy is not so much the production of knowledge as the safeguarding of the awareness of the source of all knowledge. The reduction in Merleau-Ponty does not hurl us out of the world; rather, it reconstitutes my living relation with, in, the world – it is the 'bringing of truth into being', the precarious balance of finding back my engagement with myself, others and with the world, which I never lost but which may have become anonymous, and looking at my commitments *ohne mitzumachen*, in order to realise that I am always already committed and (as we shall see later) in order to be able to give expression to my commitments. Philosophy is situated, the reduction is situated and truth is situated.³ Experience of others is for Merleau-Ponty a crucial factor in the development from a transcendental to an existential conception of the reduction. Husserl had used an essentially anonymous transcendental plane on which the problem of the other did not arise. For Merleau-Ponty the reduction more than anything else makes it clear that I am essentially related to others. My existence as embodied implies essentially that another can see or experience me. It is important to understand here that the experience of someone else of my body is an experience of me – my outside is not detached from me, but it is me externally. My partner experiences my joy, my moodiness, my affection or dislike. We have an outer appearance: 'He must and I must have an outer appearance, and there must be, besides the perspective of the For Oneself – my view of myself and the other's of himself- a perspective For Others – my view of others and theirs of me. Of course, these two perspectives, in each one of us, cannot be simply juxtaposed, *for in that case it is not I that the other would see, nor he that I should see*. I must be the exterior I present to others, and the body of the other must be the other himself'; 'at the very moment when I experience my existence – at the ultimate extremity of reflection – I fall short of the ultimate density which would place me outside time' (PP xii). It is in philosophical reflection that I come to see my irreflexive life for what it is and it is also in reflection that I come to see what my relations to others really are. The

³ As such it is, however, *called for*. Philosophy is not a duty, living a human life is not a duty, but it is called for. We can only ignore philosophy, we can't dismiss it. Cf. *In Praise of Philosophy*, where Merleau-Ponty equivocates the situation of the philosopher in his time with Socratic practice to bring truth into being.

extreme of reflection is affirmed and broken up by my realisation that I am a human being among human beings, and that I am exposed to others, and to you. Even if I return to common sense or science, I will experience these better and deeper because of my reflection. In a way, Merleau-Ponty re-interprets the delphian maxim – know thyself-, and in a changed context reserves for philosophy a very classical place, as that possibility of existence that makes us human and gives us the world and truth – but categorically rather than as content. Philosophy is a philosophical life for Merleau-Ponty. What my commitments are, what my engagements are, what I do with my found freedom – these questions have to be answered by living my life. In philosophy I learn to see the world rightly. I do not, as Wittgenstein suggested, throw away the ladder on which I climbed to get the right view. As we said, philosophy always has to begin again, it is never done. This contrast, again, can be expressed in terms of monologue and dialogue.

Communication as intersubjectivity leads Merleau-Ponty to his reformulation of the phenomenological reduction. In it, perhaps, we see a pre-figuring of the later ideas of Visible/Invisible, the Flesh and the Chiasm. It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy still provides highly valuable insights and ideas that we can appropriate in an attempt to develop a manner of thinking about what happens when we speak which is able to express an integral experience of the reality of interaction and dialogue preceding that of common sense and communication theory and research. This methodological perspective is at the moment the most important for me; with it stands or falls the value of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy for the concerns of us, today.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's presence in contemporary phenomenology is notable. If we accept the three "Urphenomene" which Tengelyi has identified in French phenomenology – processes of meaning formation; experience of the body; the event of address (*Sinnbildungsvorgang, Leiberfahrung, Anspruchserignis*) and the constellation of a school emphasising the dimension of the gift in reduction and intentionality on one hand (Marion) and one emphasising the sublime infinite abyss we uncover underneath all meaning formation in symbol and language on the other (Richir), we can easily see that the work done by Merleau-Ponty on the relation between communication and the phenomenological reduction still deserve close attention.

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