

Phenomenology and the Political: Dialectical Inertias and Ontological Ambiguities

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Abstract: This essay takes as its point of departure some overlooked implications recognizable in the intersection between phenomenology and political thought, political theory or, simply, the concept of the political, as it is used in this entire intellectual endeavor. In order to do so, it ventures on the realm of dialectic and ontology, before concluding that phenomenology is reciprocated by a universal philosophical quest for liberty and liberty, not matter how it is approached, remains only an isolated, stoic and/or skeptic abstraction if it is pursued exclusively in an individual manner. Consequently, in order to be meaningful and relevant, liberty cannot be separated from communities and societies and, taking this last aspect into account, it follows that is intimately tied to the political. Since the political is deeply imbued with dialectic and ontology, the pretention of phenomenology to accessing only the effective and the immediate, dismissing anything outside, is not valid; even though it has numerous desirable and praiseworthy outcomes.

Keywords: alienation, liberty, immediacy, metaphysics, becoming

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology's engagement with the political has always been problematic. I am assuming this statement as the central tenet of the present paper. The political is approached here not as practical political activity, but, as Paul Ricoeur defined it - the immanent drive for social organizing present in every community (Ricoeur 2007; see also Marchart 2007). It is herein exactly, in the difference between the political and effective politics, that Ricoeur places the origin of evil, somehow in a Leibnizian theodicy fashion and also following the classical maxim belonging to Lord Acton: since the political is permanently embedded in practical politics, and since the latter is

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always incomplete, imperfect and most of the times simply incapable of properly dealing with the problems of a society, hence the appearance of evil as a consequence of this particular action that is always appealing to and always betraying universality.

From a different philosophical angle, indebted especially to G.W.F. Hegel, and for different reasons as well, my endeavor will give credit to the hypothesis that, rather than emerging from its relation to politics, phenomenology's problems are to be found especially in connection to the political. This aspect will also help us understand the weaknesses and ambiguities existing in the political and ideological assessments of several prominent phenomenologists, such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Jan Patočka, Günther Anders and Emmanuel Levinas.

From the beginning, I clearly state that I am not generally debating the work of these hugely influential philosophers, nor am I trying to prolong or dissolve the stake of this article in their elaborate and far reaching philosophies. Their efforts will be drawn upon to the extent they are relevant with reference to the political, which's main premises are, from my point of view, dialectical and ontological. Dialectical, because politics is a sum of all determinacy sorts - assuming, or not, determinant paces - that become truly visible to us only through unfolding processes which basically constitute the political. Ontological, because the political can be understood properly only in perspective as an emanation of being that possesses more recognizable ideological and organizational features than a certain being can phenomenologically reveal within a certain context.

Once more, the concept of political is not to be confounded neither with political activities, nor with political science. As Jung argued many decades ago, phenomenology and political science share a strong preference for empiricism, but while the first is confined to analyzing patterns of external behavior, phenomenology stresses that empiricism is meaningless in the absence of intentionality. Therefore, phenomenology is not a positivist philosophy of science and its intersections with political science, although relevant for the immediate human existence, are to be treated cautiously (Jung 1971, 538-563; see also Jung and Embree 2016).

The article is structured as follows: the first part deals with several inconsistencies of facticity, of appearance as the basis of phenomenology and, respectively, their relevance for the topic of the paper, the second part is centered on the never overcome connection

between phenomenology and dialectic, while the third part insists on the ontological ambiguities that phenomenology gives birth to. Finally, the conclusions section provides a final assessment of phenomenology's 'clumsiness' with reference to the political, arguing that even if phenomenology has done a tremendous work in restating the importance of immediacy and its diverse layers of being, avoiding the challenges of both empiricist positivism and psychology, its position regarding the political remains deeply problematic, with all the efforts authors like Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, among others, have conducted in this regard.

INCONSISTENCIES OF FACTICITY

To say facticity is to immediately go beyond facticity. The dynamic of the sensible becomes intelligible only as streams of continuity that go back and forth, thus compelling Hegel to acknowledge both in the preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and in his *Logic*, that movement has a greater importance, even for phenomenology, than certain historical principles that attempt to fixate the meaning of effectiveness once and for all (Hegel 1979; 2010).

Phenomenologists of the 20th century, like Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty, stressed that any ontology is only possible as phenomenology, respectively that the conscience observing the manifold processes that tackle the diversity of the sensible world is an immanent part of that world and can only arbitrarily be separated from it since, as Merleau-Ponty insists that we effectively think with our bodies (Heidegger 2008; Merleau-Ponty 2012; Toadvine and Lawlor 2007, 85-86) – but this does not annul conscience, although it rightfully somatizes it; it only transforms it into a moment of movement, a moment in which thinking thinks itself in the plenitude of its dynamic being.

For Husserl, conscience acts in an eidetic way and cannot be separated from the objects of its reflection; intentionality aside, it is merely a phenomenon among others (Husserl 2008). But intentionality is precisely what precedes and anticipates conscience (Ricoeur 1998), regardless it acts in a voluntary (conscious) or involuntary (psychoanalytic) way (Ricoeur 2004); even if, for Levinas, exactly the opposite is true: intentionality is inextricably linked to thinking and this always presupposes infinity, the sheer 'inadequacy' (Levinas 1991; see also Levinas 1987, 98). Conscience represents therefore the itself phenomenon's awareness, and this acumen is not achieved only through rational thinking, through what Deleuze and Guattari call

‘arborescent’ as opposed to ‘rhizomatic’ thinking: emotions, affects, idiosyncrasies of all sorts contribute as well to this denouement (Deleuze and Guattari 2003). Still, how a phenomenon possesses itself only by merely existing? Husserl’s intentionality basically proves the old Kantian dilemma that we cannot possibly apprehend our bodies only as phenomena, as sensible creations; we are compelled to think about them as well, and this introduces a metaphysical rapture in phenomenology that remains unsolved until today: the tricky issue of the thing in itself. Lacanian psychoanalysis calls it alienation: when, during the mirror stage, I recognize myself in the mirror, I am able to grasp only a truncated image of my body and, furthermore, I am not able to go back in relating to phenomena as simple, non-mediated existence (Lacan 2006). Alienation occurs not only with reference to myself, but also in how societies understand themselves, and becomes the political which expresses itself in various practical ways. It does not matter which type of alienation, individual or social, came first or is more important. This is not the issue at stake here. Simply put, they cannot exist separately, and they mutually constitute each other. For the topic of the present paper, it is important to acknowledge how alienation irremediably disrupts the world of phenomena, not necessarily by fragmenting its unity, but by infusing it with a form of non-being and non-intersubjectivity that cannot be simply expelled, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) does, as a ‘sleeve’ of being, or as a process of being ‘picking’ itself.

Concerned with the processes of how things appear in the world (Ricoeur 2004; Kohák 1989), in their palpable immediacy, phenomenology is somehow a (delayed) reaction to the continental philosophy of the 19th century and its constitutive metaphysics. As Heidegger (2008) stresses, to distinguish between mind and body, subject and object, conscience and matter – is to remain part of the long and inadequate Western metaphysical tradition that begins with Plato, is reactivated by Descartes and only partially contested by Kant at ontic, not ontological level, in order to make a spectacular comeback through the works of Hegel and his philosophical school; for Heidegger, residual metaphysics is to be found as well in Husserl’s involuntary distinction between intentional conscience and phenomena, respectively in the fact that he did not abandon the Kantian moral teleology. The ‘Dasein’ does not transcendently and thus metaphysically engage the larger truth of its own being, but is

itself transcendent, not transcendental, with reference to being, existing as a mere bubble on its phenomenological surface.

Still, by trying to arrive at beingness through being, Heidegger (2008) recognizes the insufficiency of phenomenology in general, and its existential phenomenology in particular¹. Why must we name that insufficiency metaphysics and attempt through all intellectual means possible to overcome it? Merleau-Ponty (1968) also relates to this insufficiency by calling it the 'invisible', the sense that always carries the visible being-phenomenon in directions that it presumably controls or will eventually control. Overall, phenomenology it is helpless on its own. Patiently, dialectic steps in. Come to think of it, although deeply repressed by phenomenology, it never stepped out, since phenomenology is always imbued with alienation, determinacy and perspective.

DIALECTICAL INERTIAS

Perhaps no other phenomenologist criticized dialectic so bluntly and pertinently as Heidegger. In *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Heidegger attacked dialectic as an epistemological method that misses the encounter with actual phenomena, while criticizing them for their supposed immovability. Only from the perspective of dialectic is phenomenology static and shallow; if one does phenomenologically approach phenomenology, it will not reveal itself as irrational and void of Spirit, but as the concrete immediacy nothing can overcome without slipping onto metaphysical, speculative grounds. That's why, while pretending to be superior and all-encompassing, dialectic is merely jumping arbitrarily from one thing to another, confusing itself by thinking too much about and, in the same time, giving phenomenology a bad and undeserved reputation (Heidegger 1999; 2008).

Emmanuel Levinas is also critical of dialectic as a method of knowledge based on unfounded generalizations which, instead of opening individuality towards its potential, it buries its uniqueness in intellectual chimeras (Levinas 1987, 36). Infinity, universality, spirit, all these alluring phantasms are trying to crush the ego's radical uniqueness into debilitating and unnecessary syntheses. By carving out the 'Other' from the 'Same', phenomenology does not surrender to dialectically achieved totality. It just explores its irreducible place in

¹ In fact, Jacques Derrida (1985) openly acknowledged the fact that Heidegger's concept of being is ultimately a concession made to the impossibility of integrally excluding metaphysics from his phenomenology.

the world under the form of inter-subjectivity and nothing more (Levinas 1991).

Somewhere between Heidegger and Levinas, Günther Anders's rejection of dialectic is centered on the inherent, humane value of each individual and how this value can be protected with the help of phenomenology against the philosophies of 'rigorousness' and of 'intransigent ideals' that have capitulated since a long time ago to the depoliticizing *mélange* between commodity and technique (Anders 1980). The issue of technique, a central topic of Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian phenomenology, will be addressed in the next section of the article.

Jan Patočka refers to dialectic as something that claims to assess the validity of every historical context from above, thus eluding the pressures of both history and time. Dialectic claims to be a form adaptable to any content, while being a mere emanation of contents in limited periods of time. Yes, phenomena have a way of hiding even from themselves, as Heidegger (2008) considers, and this is why the new is not visible to us from the beginning but only as it unfolds, arriving to its (in)complete consequences. Still, this becoming must not give in to dialectic, but extract its understanding from itself, not from an alien exteriority with which it will never properly merge (Kohák 1989).

Merleau-Ponty's quarrel with dialectic is highly original and powerful. However, he already makes a concession to dialectic by splitting it into good and bad. The bad is the rigid, dogmatic dialectic, which betrays philosophy rather than opening it to the universal. This dialectic resembles a 'spell' casted over the world, admits no 'extrapolations' and its anticipation of developments is always 'disappointed' by effective events. Dialectic plays with questions and answers and ends up being none, stuck in bitter cynicism. The 'good' dialectic is very aware that there are no firm positions it can mediate between and that signification is not placed from above on phenomena, but it is developed within them and their becoming. It is the dialectic without synthesis, without dogmatism, a dialectic that allows things to flourish, not trying to restrict them within an interpretative straitjacket (Merleau-Ponty 1968). The good dialectic understands the tensions inherent to existence that open the ways to metaphysical interstices without trying to replace those tensions with its substitutive magic (Merleau-Ponty 2012).

Finally, Sartre is probably the most prominent phenomenologist that, far from doing battle with dialectic, actually welcomes it in his existentialist-Marxist project. He proceeds so, however, at a later stage in his career. In *Being and Nothingness*, dialectic is replaced by cyclicity: being is capable of reaching itself only within attempts that constitute a specific circle of efforts: in order for a circle to begin, another must end (Sartre 1992). But in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, dialectic is rehabilitated to a generous extent. Distinguishing between series and groups, the former being constituted through passive and imposed from above tasks, while the latter rising from within series as revolutionary formations animated by a historically understood and assumed praxis, only to relapse, sooner or later, into seriality – Sartre argues that their relation, occasionally punctuated by class struggle, is dialectical to the core. Praxis itself is dialectical, since it is both transcendent, as work teleologically oriented towards augmenting humanity and therefore towards freedom – and immanent, phenomenological, as concrete, routine activities. Emancipation within phenomenology cannot ever equate with emancipation from phenomenology; however, this inherent convulsion, devoid of both Hegelian and Marxist idealism, Sartre claims, must be recognized as dialectical (Sartre 2004).

Slowly, phenomenology opens itself therefore to dialectic; but just cautiously and partially. However, the phenomenologists herein questioned insist on liberty as the necessary outcome of their philosophical projects. For Heidegger, liberty is the shacking of 'Dasein' unauthenticity and its assertive posing of itself as being for death, fulfilling the expectations of its historical being. For Levinas, liberty is the freedom to create a sense between individualities without reducing themselves to that sense. For Anders, liberty is contemplating, in a Heideggerian vein, technological apocalypse as the impossibility of a proper being without ever abandoning the humanity of man to the already commoditized and technologized philosophies of modernity. For Patočka, liberty is obtained by individuals resisting both history and universality by subsuming them to phenomenology, not by passively abandoning oneself to them (see also Findlay 2002). For Merleau-Ponty, liberty begins with assuming one's corporality and with eradicating all metaphysical projects by recognizing time and space as 'shirrs' of that corporality. Finally, for Sartre, liberty means revolutionary praxis conveyed through the permanent, but necessarily emancipator dialectic between series and groups.

However, liberty, as we recall from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (2011), is, along with God and immortality, an idea of pure reason; a transcendent, metaphysical idea. Liberty contradicts phenomenology as a teleological project, individual and collective alike, thus placing phenomenology into perspective. Although fiercely rejected, dialectic is present in Husserl's Kantian project of 'empire of (intentional) purposes' (see here the 2015 Miettinen's interesting evaluation of Husserl's position regarding political idealism), in Heidegger's effort to arrive at beingness through being, in Merleau-Ponty's recognition of existential tensions that are impossible to overcome, in Patočka's dismissal of authoritarian political regimes, in Levinas's urge for a shared sense of being, in Anders's engagement with technological commodity, even if only as what Hegel and later Adorno and Horkheimer called 'negative' dialectic, in Sartre's existential phenomenology. Infusing phenomenology without escaping history, Merleau-Ponty's 'good' dialectic – both Hegel and Marx would have contested the dogmatic dialectic of Soviet Marxism, for example, that 'bad' dialectic Merleau-Ponty has written about – is here to stay.

ARE THERE ONTOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES OR AMBIGUITIES?

This may seem as a strange section, since phenomenology explicitly detached itself from and dismissed ontology as camouflaged metaphysics. But when analyzing the relation between the political and phenomenology, ontology is a must, since, as stated in the introductory section, the political is an emanation of being that, in Heideggerian terms, is situated at the intersection between beingness and being. Not only that: any project of liberty is symbiotically linked with political thinking and, as we have seen, phenomenology, as every Western philosophical tradition, is highly preoccupied with liberty, its possibilities, limits and scope.

Therefore, phenomenology does not go beyond dialectic and ontology. It only slows them down, at its own expense. Furthermore, the metaphysic question brought up in this essay as a phenomenological rest consisting in a combination between alienation and liberty is only metaphysical looked at from phenomenology's point of view, just like Heidegger said about the static immediacy of phenomenology as appearing like that only for dialectic. Since it is derived from the incompleteness of immanence, dialectic cannot be

metaphysic in the sense ascribed to it by phenomenology since it is never the non-historical and exterior 'spell' thrown upon phenomena, as Merleau-Ponty plastically expressed his opinion on the matter. Dialectic ultimately points out to the imminent failure of every phenomenological project.

This failure is mostly visible in tackling the political. The quest for liberty has brought phenomenology into the public sphere, where it divided itself into numerous directions, some inspired, some regrettable and some plainly dangerous. Here, the connection between liberty and ontology is realized through ideology, as a mediator between effective freedom and its future, institutionalized prospects. Ideology not in Marxist terms, but in the sense Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe used it in one of their most seminal books, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2001): not as 'commodity fetishism', but as an inherent perspective of being, looking and acting upon the world.

Let us start with Merleau-Ponty's brand of non-communist or, as he calls it, 'a-communist' socialism (Toadvine and Lawlor 2007, 310-312). It is certainly different than Sartre's existential Marxism discussed above, since it dismissed uncritical attachments towards the Soviet Union after the Second World War and argues in favor of an independent, both domestically and internationally oriented (French) left. Patočka's firm commitment to moderation and cultural liberalism and his not so vocal, but steady political expectations are to be found in his critical distance towards Czechoslovakian state-socialism during the 1960's (Findlay 2002, 122-132). Husserl's attachment to Kant's categorical imperative and his teleological empire of purposes both suggest a preference for cultural liberalism (Husserl 1999; 1965). Ricoeur's insistence on competition as the premise of a functional society, competition that the market must not be allowed to signify entirely, makes him also an advocate of liberalism (Ricoeur 2007). Levinas stresses on the struggle against tyranny by institutionalized political freedom, and not merely by moral means as Kant's categorical imperative, which is powerless against heteronomy and, therefore, against dictatorship. This view turns Levinas into a supporter of civic liberalism (Levinas 1987, 17).

Anders's technological pessimism is not tempered by his intellectual involvement with Marxism, therefore he inclines towards Heidegger's stance on technique and its impossibility to become a proper being due to its propensity towards the calculable in the

detriment of quality and ultimately of art (Heidegger 1977; 2001). However, Heidegger's political involvement is not nearly as 'innocent' as that of the other phenomenologists discussed here, since his entanglements with National-Socialism are well known and cannot be dismissed simply by treating politics as a matter of beingness rather than of being, the last one being, in Heidegger's philosophy, the most important – even if he considered himself a phenomenologist! As Tom Rockmore (1991) points out, the difference between Heidegger's philosophy and his political choices is not a radical one; it is simply a difference of scale. In other words, between his political romanticism and his plain fascist engagement, the road is not as bumpy as one might think.

To sum up this section, the concessions made by phenomenology to liberty, regardless of its ideological approach, can be considered, in the end, as a tribute offered to dialectic and its web of mediations that constitute different ontological projects, namely various historical beings. Is this diversity a source of promising possibilities or of ontological ambiguities? While recognizing the first option, I would incline, however, towards the latter, since it amounts to a direct violation of phenomenology's central tenet of immediacy, non-positivist empiricism and its cult of revealing the appearance of things within the phenomenological indivisibility of the world.

CONCLUSION: PHENOMENOLOGY'S POLITICAL DILEMMA

Although it does not follow from this short essay, phenomenology has numerous laudable outcomes: even if radically empirical, it is opposed to scientific positivism and to psychological individualist positivism (Husserl 2008; 1997); it reminds us to look at the world as a part of it, not scientifically and somehow from above – take into account Merleau-Ponty's example of having experienced a plain, a river, a forest, a beach, and having to understand them exclusively through a geography lesson (Merleau-Ponty 2012); it warns us about the dangers of unleashed technique that, in Hegelian terms, is purely anti-dialectical since it converts, through markets and commodities, qualities back to quantities, and not the other way around, as dialectic truly works; in close connection to this last point, phenomenology argues against the excessive 'mathematization' and 'naturalization' that occurs today with reference to the individual ego (Ricoeur 2004); last but not least, phenomenology acts as a prophylactic remedy

against overthinking, which is definitely one of dialectic's vulnerabilities, along with the many others presented above.

Being that as it may, phenomenology cannot avoid dialectic and ontology because it cannot avoid the political, respectively a greater and far reaching understanding of itself as a situated, historical project. And to do so requires going beyond facticity, beyond the sensible diversity, even if only to return to it with a superior intellectual strength. This exercise of negation is Hegelian to its core. Come to think of it, we do not need phenomenology to present us with the dangers of oppressing the individual's irreducible particularity, of giving in to the mathematization and mechanization of the world in modern times, or of avoiding the traps of oversimplifying through dichotomic approaches. Kantian idealism and especially what Ricoeur (2004) calls Hegel's 'ontological phenomenology' did that way before the birth of phenomenology. Hegel insisted in his *Philosophy of Right* that the individual is the cornerstone of any valid modern political project (Hegel 2003), that mathematics is a threat to the dialectical advancement of spirit when it replaces philosophy's understanding of becoming with its own (Copilaş 2017) and, finally, that reason is always within and between phenomena, not laying metaphysically outside them (Hegel 1979). Furthermore, he insisted that dialectic is not a prospective philosophical method, but one that concerns itself with understanding mediations after they have unfolded, expanded and superseded their speculative unity into something new. After all, Minerva's owl takes flight in the evening, not during the day: philosophical knowledge is therefore an entirely retrospective process. In the last instance, the concept of the political that I have used here is centered on Hegel's concept of recognition, which gives dialectic its driving force and, if ignored, will eventually turn phenomenology into a frivolous abstraction.

Not knowing how to properly manage the political, and phenomenologically being in the impossibility to do so, phenomenology reveals itself as nothing more than dialectic that has preoccupied itself too much with one of its moments, with the risk of isolating it from its speculative but nevertheless present equals. After all, in order to understand rivers, beaches, forests and so on, one must go beyond their immediate appearance and learn about the ecosystems that bring them together, no less that which are brought together by nature itself. Geography does not provide a knowledge that contradicts the effective experiences of nature, but a knowledge that enriches them

without ever trying to replace them. So dialectic with phenomenology and the political with everyday life are doing.

Recent approaches of the relation between phenomenology and the political are more radical ways than the endeavor to endorsing not only phenomenology's inescapable political framework but in bluntly pointing out its epistemic colonial implications. Christian Matheis considers that the foundations of phenomenological thinking were laid out by Hegel, continued in a very different manner by Nietzsche and fully developed in the 20th century by Husserl and Heidegger. Basically overlapping modern continental philosophy, this amounting only to a branch of what Matheis refers to as the 'Anglo-political discourse' – Matheis considerable expanded interpretation of phenomenology identifies five major concepts, which act like discursive 'ciphers'; their various combinations produce hegemonic intellectual devices that fall short of properly engaging with alterity and should be treated cautiously in the economy of almost every philosophical project:

Phenomenology predominantly operates as a five-part conceptual "fortress" fortified by the rhetorical biases expressed as permutations of being, existence, experience, essence, and reality. If this challenge holds, then the composite (omnibus) philosophical cipher allows scholars already entrenched in positions of ideological dominance to remain both (a) in discursive dominance and (b) unmotivated or under motivated to comprehend or respond to fields of thought and description inconsistent with the fortified cipher. That is, if phenomenologists assume that their cluster of core concepts obtain the essence of phenomena, such as being in existence, this may have the result of zeroing out alterity, where alterity refers to unshared features, that which cannot subsume into phenomenology (Matheis 2016, 321).

In this sense, phenomenology does not stubbornly and unconvincingly try to avoid the political but is precisely hyper-political to its inner conceptual core. This may very well be an informed and valid scholarly analysis, but its stake is certainly beyond what I have assumed in the present essay, even if it basically confirms once more phenomenology's inadequate pretention to do away with the political, with the polity that made it possible in the first place.

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