

## THE PULSE OF PHENOMENOLOGY

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*One hears it said that phenomenology remains incapable of any critical discourse, particularly as far as political regimes are concerned. Its very method condemns it from the outset to mere descriptions, whatever might be the realm to which one 'applies' it. It can only remain mute in debates concerning the forms of public life.<sup>1</sup>*

Over a century after Edmund Husserl's breakthrough work, *The Logical Investigations*, it is still far from obvious what comes to pass under the name "phenomenology"; what is implied in the quasi-dialectical conjunction of the many phenomena and the one *logos*; what secret commerce flows between them; how their combination becomes possible; where phenomena end and *logos* begins. Perhaps this indeterminacy, too, is an integral part of phenomenology that, like everything finite, must lose itself in order to maintain itself alive, sacrificing its future as a complete doctrine to an orientation, a trajectory, an infinitely open tendency back to the things themselves. Should, in line with modern philosophy, we categorize this innermost tendency of phenomenological thought as "self-critical," we would need to refrain from taking for granted either the critical drive, pulsating at the heart of the thinking it animates, or the core "self" of phenomenology, divided between phenomena and *logos*. Self-criticism entails much more than de-formalizing the results drawn from philosophical investigations, however rigorous these might be; it means the disquietude of the self divided against itself, the undying unrest, if not the heat of *polemos*, felt in the infrastructure of phenomenology, in the place where *logos* encounters phenomena and phenomena show themselves to *logos* without establishing a final and monolithic identity. Although it largely revolves around the problem of givenness, phenomenology itself is not fully given: the path to givenness must be unremittingly withdrawn, criticized, won over, and withdrawn again.

The minimal determination of phenomenology as a critique and, in particular, a self-critique, respects its sheer (non-formal) indeterminacy, its definition as a tendency of existence oriented toward the possible, not an actualized system of thought. More than a conceptual or epistemological label, critique is the promise of phenomenology's perpetual self-rejuvenation, for which it is ready to ransom all the prestige attached to a mature, tried-and-tested doctrine. There is, despite the persistent philosophical dream of a seamless

integration of judgment and experience, signification and perception, language and things, a cut in the fabric of phenomenology where phenomena are kept apart from *logos*, even as they are intrinsically articulated with it. The name of the cut, signaling this basic division, is, precisely, “critique” (from the Greek *krinein*: to separate, to distinguish, to discern), which thwarts the closure of phenomenology in a self-validating circle of ratiocination and sends the first cracks through the monolithic façade surrounding a way of thinking that was never meant to achieve doctrinal stability. What if phenomenology organized itself around this rift, at the same time desiring to bridge it and feeling itself compelled to maintain it open? What if, in other words, phenomenology were synonymous with critique?

Assuming that critique is not superadded onto but is, rather, endemic to the phenomenology it literally cuts in half, it comes to mean something other than a theoretical attitude we can resort to or discard at will. Even when not explicitly invoked, critique is operative behind the scenes of every phenomenological procedure or meditation. It further follows that one way of interrelating phenomena and *logos* is entirely out of the question, namely tautology. The case in point here is what, in the influential Paragraph 7 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines as the “preliminary concept” (*Vorbegriff*) of phenomenology, which is, in fact, its ultimate conception (indeed, the after-conception) where a normative, post-critical ideal has been already surreptitiously enunciated. The absolute unity of phenomena and *logos* announces itself in the interpretation of *apophainesthai ta phainomena*, or “letting that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself.”<sup>22</sup> A peaceful, idyllic, utopian coexistence of the non-dominating, radically passive reason and everything that appears to and through it, *apophainesthai ta phainomena* may easily slide into the dogmatic slumber of thinking, self-assured about the ontological method of accessing phenomena. The obsessive multiplication of identities and identifications, of phenomena with themselves and with *logos*, in the dead respite of tautology covers up and suffocates the most vibrant aspects of the concept of phenomenology: the double, redoubled, and ongoing critique of *logos* with recourse to phenomena and of phenomena—through a certain kind of *logos*. And, with this, it violates the tension that sets the cadence and controls the pulse of phenomenology. Only as a critical ideal—an ideal devoid of ideality, a wholly “material” ideal lending a voice to the things themselves and, by the same token, offering a normative guiding thread to phenomenological investigations—is the *logos of phenomena*, barely distinct from what it aims to express, imaginable.

The “pulse” and the “heart”: these are not idly rhetorical turns of phrase but code-words for that which animates phenomenology by granting it a certain rhythm, making it vibrate outside its confines, and, finally, temporalizing it. To be sure, in a recent excellent study, *Au Coeur de la Raison, la Phénoménologie*, Claude Romano has also resorted to the trope of the heart in connection to phenomenology. “No longer seeking to oppose reason and sensibility, language and experience, all the while keeping them distinct,” writes Romano in the epilogue to his book, “phenomenology is a quest for the reason of infra-rationality; it promises a reason ‘sensible at heart’ because it opens the heart of reason to sensibility.”<sup>23</sup> But is reason—*ratio*: one of the many, albeit already significantly impoverished, significations of *logos*—capacious enough to contain phenomenology, even where the latter has opened itself to the sensible? Doesn’t Romano conflate, thanks to an erroneous but productive synecdoche, the heart with one of its chambers? Isn’t phenomenology greater than reason itself, which, along with phenomena, sojourns in its broken heart? Don’t these asymmetrical divisions, within *logos* as much as between *logos* and phenomena, bestow the sense of being alive onto the thinking that endeavors to articulate them? Doesn’t phenomenological *logos* become vibrant solely on the condition that it reproduces, within itself, the fissuring inherent to the world of phenomena? And, besides, what kind of a heart is it that, rather than lodged in the hidden recesses of a body of thought, is beating right on the surface of phenomena that obscure nothing, least of all a hidden, deeper layer of “true being”? If phenomenology has a heart, it wears this heart on its sleeve, as it were, in the essential superficiality, toward which its most disparate methodological vectors tend.

Whatever the surface we approach phenomenologically, the evidence bespeaking its deep fracturing is glaring. (This is, perhaps, the only exception to the axiom of “no-depth”: the deep fracturing of surfaces.) An exorbitant separation between thinking, logic, and the sciences, on the one hand, and the elemental structures and

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experiences of the life-world, on the other, is, for Husserl, the chief culprit in the crisis of Western *logos*. So entrenched is this *uncritical* divide that, within the realm of thinking, confusion reigns as to the status of that which is thought. The crucial analytical separation between noetic acts and their noematic targets is eclipsed by the naïve realist focus on the difference between reason and reality, which, presumably, exists “in itself,” as though this “in itself” has managed to escape the Midas’ touch of human intentionality. It is conceivable, however, that after tirelessly insisting on the need to overcome the divide between thinking and the life-world at any price, to the point of turning it into a “productive tautology,” and thereby responding to the crisis and the excessive separations it eventuated, phenomenologists have grown allergic to splits, fissures, and caesurae of all sorts. This is their *déformation professionnelle*. In dialectical terms, they have repressed the bad consciousness (equivalent to the critical stage, not to the skeptical attitude) of their discipline, instead of trying to work through it. Overwhelmed by the excessive plentitude of givenness, they have left un-thought the positive potential of rupture and negativity, such that this blind spot has come to signal the crisis of phenomenology itself, unaware, perhaps, that only a divided, fissured *logos* is capable of faithfully shadowing the ineluctable scatter of phenomena.

Husserl’s own metaphysical extravagances, including his alleged adherence to the primacy of pure perceptual present and his foundationalism, which Derrida has extensively discussed since his earliest deconstructive forays, are, in turn, the toxic byproducts of an extreme and adverse reaction to crisis. It hardly needs mentioning that the Husserlian program for overcoming the impasse of contemporary intellectual practices hinges on a successful bridging of empty intentions and fulfilled intuitions, or—which amounts to the same thing—reawaken that rationality which, divorced from the things themselves, has been spinning out of control in a spiral of self-generated abstractions. But should we discard the legacy of the crisis as a coherent, unified whole? As an alternative to a negative “knee-jerk” response bent on covering over all onto-epistemological ruptures, the cutting of critique (and of judgment) still permits one to discern the distant rumblings of the crisis that, similarly, derives from the verb *krinein*.

Another way of dealing with the common predicament of the sciences and of phenomenology requires distilling the scissions that trigger them down to the constitutive distance, at once critical and ontological, between *logos* and phenomena. To acknowledge this distance is not to reaffirm the quintessentially modern segregation of knowledge from reality but to locate a series of ruptures within the necessarily unfinished edifice of phenomenology, freeing up the space for a plurality of interpretations and for representations that do not always culminate, nor are extinguished in, pure presence. Despite the overabundance of references to critique in Husserl’s writings, this task is still to be undertaken. We are, more specifically, to ask, in keeping with a certain spirit of phenomenology itself: What or who accomplishes the work of criticizing and what or who is criticized here? And how? Allow me merely to hint at the shape of a response: the critiques of *logos* by phenomena and of phenomena by *logos* jointly amount to the critique of phenomenology by itself, in the absence of its final self-identity and ultimate “truth.” Phenomenology becomes what it is (namely, a mode of thinking, interpreting, and being in the process of becoming) largely as a result of this “negative” self-relation. For what if the two poles of phenomenology—the two that are meant to merge into one—were articulated by means of a double hinge of such critique? How, in its redoubling, would critique singularly determine, without deciding upon, that which it has articulated? And what, finally, is the nature of articulation in and through division, *la brisure*, or the hinge—so prominent in Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*—now transplanted into the heart of phenomenology?

Allowing phenomena to disclose themselves and *logos* to voice itself, the two critiques dictate, in their successions, alternations, and modifications, the rhythm of phenomenology, the expansion and contraction of its heart’s chambers. Critique of *logos* with recourse to phenomena represents the stage of expansion, whereby vacuous constructs of formal logic are confronted with their normative presuppositions and ontological foundations, while abstract reason emerges out of purely conceptual constraints to the light of the life-world.<sup>4</sup> In its amplifying capacity, it acquires a meaning diametrically opposed to that of the Kantian condensation of reason within the limits proper to reason alone. The phenomenological critique of logic and, more broadly, of sedimented rationality belonging to the philosophical tradition and detached from what it reasons about is

positive and creative to the extent that it fills in the outlines of empty schematisms through a call to go “back to the things themselves,” which is simultaneously a recall of *logos* to itself, in the broadest range of its meanings, and to the phenomena that exhibit themselves before “the originally presentive consciousness of something.”<sup>5</sup> To wit, the temporal modality of this operation is the past, retrievable through a certain genealogical, if not genetic, going-back to everything Western rationality has discarded or rendered unconscious, even though it still relied on the repressed material for the production of meaning. The expansion of *logos* as a consequence of undergoing a critique by phenomena is nothing other than the becoming-ontological of *logos* rescued from the straightjacket of pure reason. Much of Heidegger’s appropriation of phenomenology presupposes the initial thrust of this critical ontologization, already palpable in the thought of Husserl, as well.

The second critique (of phenomena by *logos*) follows on the heels of reason’s amplification and attains the exact opposite effect—that of contraction, evident in the reduction of the positings of natural attitude. The rise of eidetic phenomenology is, in the last instance, indebted to this critical narrowing-down, which is not to be mistaken for reduction *tout court* and which permits the field of pure consciousness to take shape in the restriction of admissible “evidence” and “self-evidence” to what is immanent to this consciousness. More recognizably Kantian, to the extent that it connotes a series of delimitations and circumscriptions of a transcendental domain (first, of pure consciousness, then of the eidetic realm as a whole), the critique of phenomena by *logos* is, also like its Kantian counterpart, productive, positive, enabling, and creative.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that it engenders new phenomena; rather, it discloses the transcendental sphere wherein the meanings of phenomena get constituted in accord with their modes of givenness. Ontologically robust, it brings to light, by delimiting them, eidetic regions of being, or, what in *Ideas I* Husserl calls “material ontologies,” not to mention the very idea of the eidetic. But its temporal orientation is futural, in that it both pre-delineates the field of transcendental consciousness and anticipates the predication of human knowledge on the freshly minted eidetic foundation, itself subject to critique and endless modification.

It is not sufficient to pass through a brief series comprised of two moments only once, in the hopes of discovering the living pulse of phenomenology.<sup>7</sup> A rhythm entails the repetition of different elements in a regularized succession, and the same applies to the rhythmic alternation of phenomenological critiques. Critique of *logos* by phenomena is an infinite task of a non-totalizing expansion of reason, the success of which has to do not so much with its decisive accomplishment as with the degree to which it becomes our indispensable *habitus* of thinking. Its orientation to the history and the pre-history of reason is, as a result of this habituation, projected into the future and entrusted with guarding against the excesses of abstraction and formalism, idealism and realism, psychologism and anthropologism.

The critique of phenomena by phenomenological *logos* is equally regular and rhythmic. Having precipitated the entire field of eidetic phenomenology, it is in a position to study the phenomenological constitution of materiality, animal nature, and the spiritual world. But it does so thanks to a persistent appraisal and delimitation of givenness, whether accepting exclusively what it finds in the immanence of consciousness or thematizing the modes of appearing of what appears before it. The future-oriented missions of grounding the sciences and of considering the constitution of reality on the transcendental and eidetic bases must, therefore, reach back to the past of givenness they are unable to surpass. In this manner, the heartbeat of phenomenology draws together the past and the future modalities of critique within and between each of its two moments. Phenomenology, we might say, reading Husserl after Heidegger, is the thrown projection of philosophy: it boasts a unique (ecstatic) temporality proper to Dasein: it exists, in the existential sense of the term. And what temporalizes it is nothing other than critique.

Let us not forget, also, that rhythm introduces an interval between the elements it interrelates, such that time is suspended within time and, for a fraction of a second, it is utterly uncertain whether the series of sounds would recommence at all. (In music, modern minimalism accentuates this uncertainty, building its compositions around the interval, from which sound is absent, and thematizing, more than anything else, the silence of the in-between.) Any given beat could be the heart’s last; analogously, the critical impulse may be

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adjourned, either for a brief moment or indefinitely, between its systolic and diastolic movements. Nothing prevents phenomenological vigilance from relapsing, at any time, into dogmatism, putting an abrupt end to the regularized succession of critical beats. The possibility of this suspension is, itself, a negative modification of the punctuated, internally interrupted rhythm, organized around a minimal spacing, a period, however imperceptible, between the phases of reason's expansion and contraction, between the critique of *logos* by phenomena and of phenomena by *logos*. As soon as phenomenologists put their faith in the security of eidetic foundations, or as soon as they fall back onto psychologism, they disrupt the most basic of phenomenological rhythms.<sup>8</sup> Works of phenomenology continue to be written but phenomenology as a living way of thinking ceases to exist.

Judging by an entry in Husserl's diary from 25/09/1906, critique has animated not only his philosophy (and, above all, his self-conception as a philosopher), but also his life. "...[A]mong the tasks that have been assigned to me," notes Husserl, "I would name, in the first place, the general task that I must resolve for myself if I am to have the strength to call myself a philosopher. I mean the task of the critique of reason, the critique of logical and practical reason, [as well as] of axiological reason in general. As long as I would not make clear...such a critique of reason..., I could not really live..."<sup>9</sup> In order to resolve the critical task by himself, the philosopher would have to cast critique in phenomenological terms and, more importantly, to conceive of phenomenology, in the crucial period between the composition of *Logical Investigations* and the formulations of *Ideas*—the period to which the diary entry belongs—in terms of a critical and self-critical endeavor. The phenomenological notion of critique and the critical idea of phenomenology would then be the methodological corollaries to the rhythm broadly outlined above and, at the same time, the meta-critical reflections on Husserl's own brand of the critical project. But to what extent is he able to attain the level independence he is dreaming of in the diary, when he vehemently insists on the necessity of the "critique of reason," which resounds for us with an unmistakably Kantian ring, intensified by the familiar division of the subject matter into the logical (pure), the practical, and the axiological (judgment)?

Regardless of formal similarities between the two, phenomenological criticism diverges from its Kantian counterpart in at least two respects: in that it has been 1) removed from its modern epistemological pedestal, receiving, instead, an ontological status and 2) harmonized with the phenomenological understanding of reason, as much as of consciousness, not as faculties but as the active tendencies of intentionality as self-transcendence toward its object. As a consequence, critique acquires a significantly broader scope here than it does in Kantian philosophy not only thanks to its ontological reach but also due to the proliferation of *logoi* and types of consciousness that are as numerous as that of which they are conscious. The "general task" turns infinite, as it always does; the closer one is to realizing it, the further away one finds oneself from its completion, mindful of the inexhaustible variety within the ever-recommencing rhythmic movement of critically inflected phenomenology.

We find echoes of this idea in Husserl's theoretical works and, above all, in the injunction to engage in a "constant critique," *in einer beständigen Kritik*, which would give one the tools necessary to resolve the critical task for oneself without solving it once and for all and without neglecting the historical becoming of philosophy. To resolve this task for oneself is neither to isolate one's thought from the tradition that has preceded it nor to claim for oneself the discovery of an unprecedented method. "In a constant critique," Husserl states in *The Crisis*, "which always regards the total historical complex as a personal one, we are attempting ultimately to discern the historical task which we can acknowledge as the only one which is personally our own."<sup>10</sup> Like many other formulations of his late work, this statement is surprisingly dialectical: it posits a critically mediated speculative identity between the personal and the historical, what is strictly "our own" and the "total...complex" of thought. A permanent critique of tradition is, in its most developed state, a self-critique, the positive outcome of which—a paradoxical, because unaccomplishable, outcome—is the ultimate discernment of one's own (critical) task, of the kind anticipated in the diary. It is, in Husserl's words, a "responsible critique," *verantwortliche Kritik*, "a peculiar sort of critique which has its ground in...historical, personal projects, partial fulfillments, and exchanges of criticism rather than in what is taken for granted by

the present philosopher.” One, which, we might add, plays a redemptive role by restoring the hope for future fulfillment to the interrupted projects of the past put in dialogue with one another and with the present. One, which, akin to Nietzsche’s monumental historiography, gathers the historical peaks of critical thought into a chain transcending time within temporal immanence.

The responsibility critical philosophers shoulder is enormous, for they take it upon themselves to do justice to the past, to the thought of their predecessors who will have lived on through the self-critique of the present and whose partially fulfilled projects will have gained a stake in the critical community of the future. To exercise this responsibility, Husserl explains, “is to make vital again [*wieder lebendig zu machen*]...the sedimented conceptual system...It is to carry forward, through his own [the philosopher’s of the present] self-reflection, the self-reflection of his forebears and thus...to reawaken [*wieder aufwecken*] the chain of thinkers...and transform it into a living present [*in eine lebendige Gegenwart*]...”<sup>11</sup> Ethical, responsible critique at its most effective is tantamount to a revival of the philosophers of the past the moment the living critic, who freely exercises active self-critique, turns herself into a channel for their partially fulfilled projects—an event that will have corrected, retrospectively, the historical injustice of death. Undoing the difference between a thinker’s biological life and the life of thought—the difference that disconcerted Husserl toward the end of his own life<sup>12</sup>—, *verantwortliche Kritik* thus stands, along with the notions of de-sedimentation, re-activation and the transcendental *epochē*, for a phenomenological equivalent to resurrection.

We are now in a position to assess what Husserl means by the dramatic assertion, full of Socratic overtones, that, while the critical task remains unfulfilled, he “could not really live.” In light of the arguments of *The Crisis* and in juxtaposition with his intimation that, until he resolves this task for himself, he cannot in good conscience call himself a philosopher, it appears that life here has nothing to do with biological living or with the life of consciousness in the “natural attitude.” It points, instead, to the kind of transcendental life that is born of phenomenological reduction and that gives the philosopher license to join the critical community of thought, to live as though there were no difference between the personal project and the historical totality of thought. In critical terms, this life is already an after-life, a tapestry of past and present philosophical activities, where the awakening of dead (sedimented) systems of thought is woven into the very fabric of living self-criticism. Of course, not just any kind of critique will be adequate for the ethical task at hand. Being a philosopher, resolving the critical task for oneself, and living: these interchangeable goals are, for Husserl, synonymous with phenomenology. The vivacity of phenomenology and the life of the phenomenologist as phenomenologist are, hereafter, inconceivable without the practice of critique and its insistently critical formulation.

All this is more relevant today, after Husserl, than ever before. To make him live again—nothing less describes the ambition of critical phenomenology.

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### NOTES

1. Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, translated by Reginald Lilly (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 516.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 58.
3. Claude Romano, *Au Coeur de la Raison, la Phénoménologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 949, translation mine.
4. Romano terms this “the enlarged reason,” *raison élargie*, even though he fails to detect any critical overtones in it (cf. *Au Coeur de la Raison*, 14ff).
5. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book, translated by F. Kersten (Dordrecht, Boston & London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983), 35ff. Husserl did not, as Derrida has it, follow “the compass of rationality, determining logos from logic,” but vice versa. See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, translated by David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 8.
6. For more on the relation between Kantian and Husserlian philosophies, see Tom Rockmore, *Kant and Phenomenology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 101ff.
7. Given that the accretion of sediments, suffocating the experience of the life-world, and thinking, dominated by vacuous abstractions, are coextensive with the historical development of the intellectual tradition, a return to the phenomena themselves must be reinitiated at every stage of the tradition’s unfolding.
8. But what about description? Does it, too, forgo the injunction of critique and interrupt its rhythm? Embedded in phenomenological description, which aspires to be faithful to the appearing of phenomena as they appear, is a critique of explanation, of theories that superimpose an external framework of principles, causes, etc. on what is. In the context of such reaction to explanatory approaches, description partakes in the critique of logos by phenomena themselves. Taken in and of itself, however, description may be termed “degree-zero of criticism,” i.e., the most positive and immediate effect of the critical phase that has just been completed. Provided it does not deteriorate into empiricism and closes itself off to the possibility of de-constitution, de-formalization, deconstruction, or self-criticism, which facilitates the resumption of the critical rhythm, description will not share the fate of the other neutralizations of phenomenological critique. I will come back to this idea below.
9. Edmund Husserl, Diary Entry, September 25, 1906. Cited in “Introduction,” *Die Idee der Phänomenologie: Fünf Vorlesungen* (Husserliana II), edited by Walter Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), vii, translation mine.
10. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy. An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 70/72.
11. The above quotations are from Husserl, *The Crisis*, 72-3/73.
12. As Husserl put it 1930, speaking of himself in the third person: “He would almost like to hope—were he allowed to grow as old as Methuselah—still to be able to become a philosopher after all.” [“Nachwort zu meinen *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*.” In *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* 11 (1930), 569.]