

Naturalism and Transcendentalism: The Ubiquity of Idealism

Phenomenology is one of the main sources of criticism directed at naturalism and the naturalization of the mind. Indeed, it raises very relevant issues concerning naturalism, and especially its objectivism, but to do so it employs a tool whose efficiency may have undesirable secondary effects, and this may be because it still contains a remainder of an unquestioned idealist conception of being. Our purpose in this paper is to follow the reworking by phenomenologists, especially by Merleau-Ponty, of their transcendental criticism of naturalism, and accordingly of transcendentalism. Thus, it is phenomenology's possibility of fulfilling its own critical program towards naive conceptions of being that we wish to call into question.

Which Naturalism does it concern?

Varieties of Naturalism

If the relationship between naturalism and consciousness and the possibility of naturalizing consciousness are two main issues of contemporary philosophy of mind, the reason for this is that most philosophers think that there is *a priori* a more or less strong contradiction between naturalism and the consideration of consciousness. As David Papineau has pointed out, the problem that one cannot avoid encountering when tackling these issues is that: «[t]he term “naturalism” has no very precise meaning in contemporary philosophy»¹. Indeed, if we refer, as Papineau does, to the origin of the current usage of this term², naturalism can be defined roughly as the idea that «reality is exhausted by nature, containing nothing “supernatural”, and that the scientific method should be used to investigate all areas of reality, including the ‘human spirit’»³. But what does that mean? Does nature encompass modal properties? Does it encompass biological, psychological or social facts? Or only physical facts? Does it contain only descriptive facts and regularities? From the Aristotelian «physis» to the Bergsonian natural «élan vital» until McDowell's «second nature» and the purely physical world of Paul and Patricia Churchland, there are so many definitions of nature that the statement «everything in the world belongs to nature» cannot be considered alone as a real thesis. The reference to scientific method is, as we will see later, more significant, but it still allows for a vast diversity of positions – from the «blank ontology» of Willard Quine to Stephen Stich's physicalism. As Geil Keert remarks: «If the only alternatives to naturalism are obscurantism, superstition, and supernaturalism, then naturalism seems to be the only game in town in our scientific culture»⁴.

¹ PAPINEAU (1999).

² That is the debate on philosophical naturalism in the early to mid-twentieth-century America. On this, see KIM (2003).

³ PAPINEAU (1999).

⁴ KERT (2008), p. 254.

The naturalism we are going to examine is the one for which there is a «problem of consciousness». But as soon as we try to express this problem, we are tempted to classify this form of naturalism as a form of materialism. Just look, for example, at the way Jaegwon Kim describes it: «The problem of consciousness is that of explaining why there should be such a phenomenon as consciousness in a world that seems fundamentally and basically material, a world in which all objects seem ultimately made up of bits of matter and nothing else»⁵. It appears that it is from a ‘materialist’ point of view, which is nowadays called ‘physicalism’, that there is a «problem of consciousness»: the existence and status of consciousness seems problematic if one makes the assumption –for epistemological reasons for example– that the world is «fundamentally and basically material». Here we come back to the thesis of Sheldon, who had already written in 1945: «The naturalism is just materialism over again under a soft name»⁶. However, this thesis is controversial and, above all, is not very significant. As Daniel Dennett points out in *Consciousness Explained*, it is the exact scope of material objects that is controversial: «the ontology of physical sciences used to encompass “caloric” (the stuff heat was made of, in effect) and the “ether” (the stuff that pervaded space and was the medium of sound vibrations in the same way air or water can be the medium of sounds’ vibrations)»⁷. To solve the mind-body problem, why not ultimately «conclude that mental substance is a particular form of matter»⁸? It follows that a reference to materialism does not appear to be in itself a fruitful way of delineating the type of naturalism that is involved in the process of the naturalization of the mind, even though it very plausibly seems that it is a premise of this process.

The Methods of Science as «The Only Avenue to Truth»

It appears that the best method for analyzing naturalism is not to define it ontologically but methodologically. For, contrary to the ontological dimension of naturalism, its methodological dimension is not disputed. All forms of naturalism would then have in common the idea that it is the natural sciences that tell us the truth about reality. Many authors could be quoted here to justify this position, beginning with Quine himself, the intellectual father of many naturalists, who is presented by Geil Keert as «the prototypical naturalist of the twentieth century»: Quine defined naturalism as the «abandonment of the goal of a philosophy prior to natural science» and «the recognition that it is within science itself and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described»⁹. Papineau’s definition of naturalism also follows this line of thought, as well as Manley Thompson’s presentation: «The closest thing to a common core of meaning is probably the view that the methods of natural science provide the only avenue to truth»¹⁰. We could also quote, as Geil Keert does in his article, David Armstrong, Sidney Hook, Arthur Danto or the notorious Wilfrid Sellars, who has expressed with all necessary clarity the claim with which we want to define naturalism:

⁵ KIM (1999), p. 42.

⁶ SHELDON (1945), p. 254.

⁷ DENNETT (1991), p. 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

⁹ QUINE (1981), p. 67 & 21.

¹⁰ THOMPSON (1964), p. 183.

«In the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not»¹¹. One can see that this definition of naturalism is adequate for our purpose if one examines the seminal texts dealing with the naturalization of consciousness: the naturalization of consciousness is almost exclusively defined as the project of explaining it by the means of the natural sciences. We can refer, for example, to Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* – one of his «ground rules» is that he «will try to explain every puzzling feature of human consciousness within the framework of contemporary physical science»¹² –, or to *Naturalizing Phenomenology*: «By “naturalized”, we mean integrated into an explanatory framework where every acceptable property is made continuous with the properties admitted by the natural sciences»¹³.

Blind Alleys of Objectivism and Transcendental Escape

The Objectivism of the Natural Sciences

If naturalism consists essentially in an allegiance to the natural sciences as being «the only avenue to truth», then naturalism seems to be first and foremost a ‘program’. But this program has, like every program, its own theoretical presuppositions. For a program is not only a method, it does not only rely on hypotheses that are known for what they are, but on real presuppositions that are not necessarily questioned for what they are. It is on these presuppositions that naturalism is criticized by phenomenology, and deserves from our point of view to be criticized. If all forms of naturalism share in common the idea that «it is within science itself [...] that reality is to be identified and described», then they all share in common a certain idea of what reality is. In particular, they all have in common what Husserl calls «objectivism», and which he characterizes in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* as follows:

What characterizes objectivism is that it moves upon the ground of the world which is pregiven, taken for granted through experience, seeks the “objective truth” of this world, seeks what, in this world is unconditionally valid for every rational being, what it is in itself.¹⁴

Objectivism is the idea that truth must necessarily be objective, that is to say valid in everybody's eyes without condition. Just consider, for example, Jaegwon Kim's characterization of scientific method. He remarks that it is not obvious to determine what a scientific method is, but despite this difficulty thinks that he can «get by with certain features that the naturalists, at least those of the mid-century, associate with science and its method»¹⁵. And this is the first feature he proposes: «Science as *objective* or

¹¹ SELLARS (1963), p. 173.

¹² DENNETT (1991), p. 40.

¹³ PETITOT, VARELA, PACHOUD & ROY (2000), p. 2.

¹⁴ HUSSERL (1970), p. 68. Henceforth *The Crisis*.

¹⁵ KIM (2003), p. 95.

intersubjective», that is the idea that «scientific properties must be cognitively invariant across different perceivers and cognizers». The thesis is quite clear: science looks for objectivity and intersubjectivity, in contrast to mere subjectivity; science looks for propositions that are true for everybody, everywhere in all circumstances, and therefore for results that are not in any way influenced by the person who proposes them or finds them. The problem is that by looking for objective results science may tend to look for results that are not just «*intersubjective*»¹⁶ but *a-subjective*, that is not in any sense marked by the fact that human subjects found them, as if science existed without human subjects thinking and doing it. Thinking objectivity as intersubjectivity or thinking it as *a-subjectivity* are of course two different things: it is their conflation that Husserl denounces in his criticism of *objectivism*. There is no «objective truth» of the world which is not at least a truth for a subject, and ‘objectivist’ scientists tend to forget this.

Objectivity or Objectivism of the Natural Sciences?

Is Husserl’s diagnosis correct? Merleau-Ponty, who devoted more attention to the real practices of scientists of his time proposed a different diagnosis: for him, scientists, and especially physicists of his time, were well aware of the problem of the relationship of the object of sciences with the subject who carries out it. This was even one of the main problems that the physicists tried to resolve as they were tackling the issue of relativity theory. From this point of view, *a-subjectivism* does not seem to be an inevitable characteristic of sciences. But we can most certainly find traces of a shift from *intersubjectivism* to *a-subjectivism* in many scientific and epistemological theories. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s *Objectivity* deals precisely with this question. They show in this book that «objectivity» is defining the sciences from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and they characterize it this way: «To be objective is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving. Objectivity is blind sight, seeing without inference, interpretation or intelligence»¹⁷. It is striking that objectivity is here defined not only as *intersubjectivity* but as «blind sight», that is *a-subjectivity*. The goal –which for phenomenology is ‘fantastical’– of attaining what is «in itself», without inferring or interpreting anything or even really seeing it, indeed seems to be one of the dreams motivating and animating contemporary scientific activity (yet not all scientific activity).

What is clear now is that this feature –«objectivity», in the objectivistic sense of the term– is nowadays one of the major constraints of scientific activity, one of its «virtues». To this extent, Husserl’s characterization of the sciences is essentially correct. As far as sciences are «the measure of all things» and define truth as being necessarily *objective*, then the consequence of this for naturalists is that only what is *objective* exists. Even if the materialist dimension of naturalism is discussed, we nevertheless find an ontological claim of naturalism here¹⁸.

¹⁶ It should be noted that in this passage Kim identifies the adjectives «objective» and «intersubjective».

¹⁷ DASTON & GALISON (2007), p. 17.

¹⁸ However, as we just mentioned, we must add that there are other interpretations of the *objectivity* of science that do not oppose it with *subjectivity*, in the sense that they underline the necessary relationship of scientific objects with human beings having defined and isolated them. To that extent, one must realize that *naturalism* is not necessarily *objectivist*. As Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical work shows, there can be other

The *objectivist* conception of objectivity defines itself, as Husserl argues, by contrast with subjectivity, so that objectivism is necessarily connected with an abstraction of any form of subjectivity from scientific discourse, and hence from 'true reality'. The problem is that, even if this abstraction were justified from a *methodological* point of view, it should not be interpreted *ontologically*: it is on account of the ontological interpretation of this abstraction that consciousness has been excluded, not only from the range of natural sciences, but from reality. Inasmuch as scientific field and reality are identified, subjectivity cannot find any place in reality. Accordingly, the possibility of a scientific treatment of subjectivity becomes problematic, if not aporetic. In *The Crisis* Husserl harshly criticizes this identification of a method with a thesis about the reality of things. For him this identification proceeds from Galilean 'physical objectivism', which turned from a methodology into a thesis about being. There thus occurred «the surreptitious substitution of the mathematical substructured world of idealities for the only real world, the one that is actually given through perception, that is ever experienced and experienceable – our everyday life-world»¹⁹. It was forgotten that method was only a method: the implications of the presuppositions of scientific «constructions, concepts, propositions, theories» were not taken into account and subsequently forgotten. As Husserl summarizes it synthetically: «It is through the garb of ideas that we take for *true being* what is actually a *method*»²⁰.

The Critical Significance of Transcendental Phenomenology

Husserl's proposition to correct this mistake and unveil «the true meaning of method», is well-known: *transcendentalism* or *transcendental phenomenology*. He conceptualized this for the first time in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*²¹. Its main idea is that

what is primary in itself is subjectivity, understood as that which naïvely pre-gives the being of the world and then rationalizes it or (what is the same thing) objectifies it²².

Husserl's gesture therefore consists in giving subjectivity its primacy (back) and claiming that world and objects are dependent upon consciousness, which «pre-gives» them. Transcendentalism consists thus in relating everything, and in particular the world and the objects, to their conditions of possibility, which are «primary». Transcendental phenomenology is thus a remedy against the ontological naïveté that consists in taking for absolute what is only relative – objects. Notwithstanding, we have to be cautious:

definitions of *nature* and *naturalism* that are coherent with phenomenological positions. However, even though these alternative definitions are fascinating, we will not focus on them in this paper. Quite logically, there is no «problem of consciousness» for these other definitions. The sciences and objectivity with which we are concerned are «objectivistically»-defined.

¹⁹ HUSSERL (1970), p. 49.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 51-52.

²¹ Henceforth, the *Ideen*.

²² HUSSERL (1970), p. 69.

Husserl's «transcendental phenomenology» has been interpreted in so many ways by so many commentators that it is difficult to try to assert anything about it, which is of course rather inhibiting²³. However, what seems quite uncontroversial is that even if it is difficult to determine what Husserl actually *accomplished*²⁴, he clearly expressed the wish to distinguish his *transcendental phenomenology* from any form of *metaphysical idealism* – and for example, from *subjective idealism*, with which it is quite often confused. The *existence* of objects does not depend upon consciousness, it is their *sense*. As John Drummond points it, transcendental phenomenology only claims that “the structures of *intentional consciousness* (both subjective and intersubjective) condition the sense of things for the subjects experiencing them»²⁵. When Husserl says that the world is «constituted» by the subject, it does not mean that this constitution is «constructive» but «disclosive»: «To constitute an object is to disclose it *as such-and-such* – to give it “sense”, to make sense of it»²⁶. From this point of view, not only the sense of scientific objects results from some subjective activity –of a methodological activity in this case–, but also the sense of our everyday world, «the world which is pregiven, taken for granted through experience». Moreover, our everyday world is presupposed by sciences. Thus, the world of the sciences is constituted on the basis of the life-world and both are constituted by the subject.

With his «radical inquiry back into subjectivity»²⁷, Husserl wants to show that *consciousness* is, as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi explain it, a «necessary (though not sufficient) condition of possibility for any entity to appear as an object in the way it does and with the meaning it has»²⁸. In this way he carries out the relativization of any object as being always an object for a consciousness. Objectivity is then conceived not only in *opposition* with subjectivity, but in the broader sense of this latter term, in *relation* to it. For Gallagher and Zahavi, the ‘transcendental gesture’ deconstructs the opposition between nature and consciousness by reconducting everything to «a view from somewhere»²⁹ and so, with many variations in the ontological meaning given to these terms, to a ‘first person perspective’, a ‘subject’ or a ‘consciousness’. Consequently, there is no contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity anymore, because objectivity is possible only from a subjective point of view, or from a series of subjective points of view. Thus, there cannot be any consistent definition of nature or reality that excludes consciousness, for there can only be something like nature because there is a subject viewing it. Adopting a transcendental stance means to return to this ‘view’ and put

²³ For an idea of this diversity see the recent book by MAESSCHALCK & BRISART (2007): the four first texts of the book are devoted to four different interpretations of Husserlian «transcendental idealism» by four major commentators of this author, some of them rejecting the correctness of this term, that Husserl applied to his own phenomenology in the 1931 Postscript to the *Ideen*.

²⁴ This recalls of course the famous students of the school of Göttingen (Roman Ingarden was one member), who saw in the transcendental turn a return to metaphysical idealism, and who tended to adhere to the early philosophy of Husserl, which was interpreted as metaphysically neutral, if not realist.

²⁵ DRUMMOND (2008), p. 206.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 55.

²⁷ HUSSERL (1970), p. 69.

²⁸ GALLAGHER & ZAHAVI (2008), p. 24.

²⁹ We must remark that this idea that a view is necessarily a «view from somewhere» is antithetical with the objectivist ideal of «blind sight»: transcendental idealism seems to be a term-to-term answer to the *a-subjective* naturalism.

science's objectivity into a subjective point of view. Thus, our world must not be identified with a world of objects anymore. It is a world lived and experienced, into which man isolates and identifies objects in order to understand and act on this world. To the extent that objects are able to be isolated on the ground of a qualitatively rich experience and correspond to an analysis of it, it is clear that not everything can be treated like an object. From a scientific point of view, this gives rise to (at least) two important consequences: 1. There cannot be any objectivist description of what is destroyed if it is isolated, and, for example, of the homogenous character of experience³⁰. 2. There can be some transcendental study of the way in which objects of sciences are constituted, which allows scientists to know what they are talking about³¹.

Husserl's transcendentalism confronts, apparently successfully, the surreptitious transformation of scientific method into the thesis about true reality that is «objectivism». But he does so by claiming that «what is primary in itself is subjectivity». Even if Husserl explicitly modifies the meaning of the word «subject», one may wonder what the real implications of this primacy of subjectivity are: do all the relevant characteristics of objectivity resist the transcendental gesture? If there is surely a fallacious meaning to objectivity, which of course any criticism of naturalism has to address, then likewise there is a sufficient and relevant meaning to it, which must also be taken into consideration. The danger would be to end up with a mere shift in perspective: to pass from a *primacy* of objectivity in naturalism to a *lack* of objectivity in transcendentalism. In the following sections we will examine the relevant meaning of it and whether phenomenology can or cannot deal with it.

From Transparent to Opaque Transcendence

Is Husserlian Transcendence Transcendent enough?

As we saw in the previous part of this paper, phenomenologists consider consciousness «to be a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of possibility for any entity to appear as an object in the way it does and with the meaning it has». The difficulty –and we commence here the long love-hate story of phenomenology and the transcendental– is that the nature of the transcendental return to the subjective view of the world, the famous ‘reduction’, is ambiguous. In principle, as some defenders of Husserl's philosophy argue, transcendental phenomenology exceeds the classical opposition of subject and object. Accordingly, it should not be considered as a form of classical idealism, and for some of them, it should not even be considered as a form of idealism at all. The problem is that we may harbour doubts about the ability of Husserl's philosophy to account for all the properties that one usually attributes to objectivity –and that one would not renounce at any price. Indeed, according to Husserl himself, one of the main

³⁰ We are there referring to the famous problematic issue of the naturalisation of phenomenal character, or phenomenal consciousness, that was for example pointed in SELLARS (1963). We can find a phenomenological criticism of Sellars' treatment of this problem in ROUX (2012).

³¹ For an example of scientists having adopted this transcendental perspective on their own objects, see BITBOL, KERSZBERG & PETITOT (2009).

attributes of objects is «transcendence», through opposition to «immanence». As he explains in the *Ideen*, immanence and transcendence do not give themselves the same way, by the same kind of acts. According to §38, what is immanent gives itself to consciousness by acts «*directed to something immanent*», which are acts «to which it is *essential that their intentional objects, if they exist at all, belong to the same stream of mental processes to which they themselves belong*»³². The object, with these mental processes, «*form essentially an unmediated unity, that of a single concrete cogito*»³³. By contrast, what is called «transcendent» is given by an act «*directed to something transcendent*», whose object does not belong to the same stream of mental processes to which it itself belongs. This means that the thing itself and reality cannot be «found at all in the concatenation of mental processes»³⁴. Therefore, according to Husserl, there is an «essentially necessary diversity among modes of being [...]: the diversity between *consciousness and reality*»³⁵, that is to say, between subject and object, immanence and transcendence.

Husserl recognizes diversity among the modes of being of transcendence and immanence. The difficulty is that one could doubt whether his characterization of transcendence is actually transcendent enough. For he himself relativizes the transcendence of the transcendent in §47 of the *Ideen*:

*an object being in itself is never such that it does not interest consciousness and the consciousness ego. The physical thing is a thing belonging to the surrounding world even if it is an unseen physical thing, even if it is a really possible, unexperienced but experienceable, or perhaps experienceable, physical thing.*³⁶

In Husserl's eyes, this means that nothing is ever really strange to our consciousness of this thing. But what is an object if it is not something that is in some sense 'opposed to us' or, at least, 'distinct from us'? Etymologically, the German word «Gegenstand», that Husserl uses and that is usually translated by the English word «object», is composed from the prefix «gegen», which means «against», and from the verb «stehen», which means «to stand». A «Gegenstand» is thus «what stands against», which implies a confrontation, or at least a distance between the object and us³⁷. From this point of view, if we claim that everything is «experienceable» (*erfahrbar*), as if this distance were always eliminable and reducible, have we adequately accounted for the objectivity of reality? For even if an object can be grasped, is not the distance between what it is and our consciousness of it always to some extent irreducible?

Consider for example the mind-body problem. A crucial aspect of this problem is that we, as human beings, quite often experience our own body as a stranger (when we are ill

³² HUSSERL (1982), p. 68 (The pagination is this of the German edition, indicated in the margins of the English one).

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89 (translation modified). The first sentence of the original text says: “*Niemals ist ein an sich seiender Gegenstand ein solcher, den Bewusstsein und Bewusstseins-Ich nichts angeht.*”

³⁷ We must precise that the etymology of the English word «object» (which comes from the Latin word «objectum») would give a similar result.

or, as Plato showed, overcome by all kinds of desires), a mysterious object that is independent from our will and to some extent always resists our attempt to integrate it in our understanding of what is 'given' to us. Thus, we experience our own body as an object whose distance to us can never be totally reduced, and which sometimes gives a tragic appearance to our life. In this respect it seems that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology does not take enough notice of the irreducible distance that always separates a subject from reality. This is the well-known criticism of the «transparency» (of the relationship of the subject to its intentional objects), which was first expressed by Martin Heidegger, and was subsequently taken up by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, we must notice here that this criticism of Husserl is the direct heir of Husserl's own philosophy: many of Merleau-Ponty's arguments against Husserl come from him. One thing must thus be said. What matters for us in this text is not, as Renaud Barbaras writes it at the beginning of the third chapter of *Le tournant de l'expérience* (devoted to the Merleau-pontian criticism of Husserl), some hypothetical «real truth» about Husserl but one interpretation of him that allows to highlight the strength of his position but also some of his difficulties or, at least, some of his ambiguities. In this sense, it is *one way* to read Husserl, *with* him but also *against* some of his assertions, that we are going to develop in the next paragraphs.

Merleau-Pontian Criticism of Husserl's Transcendentalism

Merleau-Ponty was as critical as Husserl of the *objectivist* form of naturalism that we sketched earlier, but he was also critical of some aspects of Husserl's transcendental criticism of this naturalism. For Merleau-Ponty, Husserl's transcendental philosophy does not account enough for the irreducible opacity of objects to consciousness, while this opacity is for him part of the objectivity of objects, part of the transcendence of the transcendent. Husserl recognizes indeed some opacity to transcendent objects but, for Merleau-Ponty, the problem is that he keeps in spite of that an ideal of transparency and experiencability that must be given up. Merleau-Ponty presents this interpretation of Husserl's philosophy in the preface of *The Phenomenology of Perception*:

For a long time, and even in recent texts, the reduction is presented as the return to a transcendental consciousness before which the world is spread out and completely transparent, [...] the world is nothing but 'world-as-meaning', and the phenomenological reduction is idealistic.³⁸

Even if it is not totally exact to say that the Husserlian conception of «the world» reduces it to the «world-as-meaning», the transparency of the world to consciousness does not seem to raise for Husserl any problem *in principle*. In fact, Husserl admits some limits to this «experiencability», and it is on them that Merleau-Ponty focuses, as we will see later, to build his own conception of «transcendent». But these limits are for Husserl purely «*factual*»³⁹, while for Merleau-Ponty they are *essential*, since he gives to them an

³⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY (2002), p. xii. By now, *The Phenomenology*.

³⁹ Husserl states this clearly at the end of §48: «Obviously there are physical things and worlds of physical things which do not admit of being definitely demonstrated in any *human* experience; but that has purely factual grounds which lie within the factual limits of such experience».

ontological significance – here lies the crucial discrepancy between them on this topic. As Husserl writes in the §142 of the *Ideen*:

Of essential necessity [...], to every “truly existing” object there corresponds the idea of a possible consciousness in which the object itself is seized upon *originarily* and therefore in a perfectly adequate way. Conversely, if this possibility is guaranteed, then eo ipso the object truly exists.⁴⁰

Even if there is no actual adequate idea of it, to every object corresponds *in principle* a perfectly adequate idea of it: reality is indexed to the possibility of our consciousness of it⁴¹. According to Merleau-Ponty, the problem is that a philosophy of this kind «rids the world of its opacity and its transcendence» and «knows nothing of the problem of other minds, or of that of the world»⁴². As the sense of everything that is not immanent to the subject is constituted by it, the other subjects as well as the world cannot really be ‘others’ in the sense that they cannot have any *real* secret for the subject. As every transcendent object transcends for Husserl every intention directed at it, it has always temporary and local secrets for the subject. Husserl highlights this fact. But this does not prevent him from saying, as the last quote shows it, that perfectly adequate ideas correspond to every truly existing object. But how can we conceive such ideas? Their existence is not realistic: they are ideal. It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty diagnoses a form of «idealism» in Husserl’s philosophy: not in the sense that Husserl would really identify the world with the ‘world-as-meaning’ but in the sense that for him the sense of all worldly transcendences is constituted by consciousness within itself, so that what is experienced can never *in principle* exceed our consciousness of it⁴³.

By contrast, Merleau-Ponty wants to give to the transcendent its transcendence back, that is both its otherness and its opacity: «The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making»⁴⁴. Merleau-Ponty insists that the world is not something that could ever be seen in full light and totally understood. Thus, his philosophical strategy is to reform the concept of «transcendent» so that it includes this dimension of opacity that is essential to it. Transcendent objects are not therefore only defined by the fact that they do not belong to the same stream of mental processes as the acts directed on them, but also by the fact that these acts can never totally encompass them, so that objects are never completely experienceable without any remainder.

⁴⁰ HUSSERL (1982), p. 296.

⁴¹ Husserl makes clear by example in section §55 of the *Ideen*, that it is not reality itself that is indexed to consciousness, but *the sense of* reality. To that extent, it seems true that there is no metaphysical idealism in Husserl. However, insofar as it is also true that, for him, reality cannot be *thought* as something independent from consciousness, Husserl seems to adopt at least some form of epistemological idealism. And we can argue with BENOIST (2012) that this epistemological idealism necessarily goes together with some form of ontological thesis: to say that reality has not any sense irrespective of consciousness is to assert a thesis that does not concern only our «ordinary» or «epistemological» access to it, but also our philosophical conception of it.

⁴² MERLEAU-PONTY (2002), p. xiii.

⁴³ Cf. the description of «pure consciousness» in §50: «the whole of absolute being which, rightly understood, contains within itself, “constitutes” within itself, all worldly transcendences».

⁴⁴ MERLEAU-PONTY (2002), p. xi-xii.

Opaque Transcendent and «Truly Transcendental»

For Merleau-Ponty, the world is not something that I could ever see in full light and understand totally (which does not mean, to prevent any sceptical criticism, that it cannot be partially and always better understood). It not only implies abandoning the *ideal* of a transparent relationship of the subject with reality, but also that a new conception of the «diversity among modes of being» has to be adopted, i.e. a new conception of being⁴⁵.

What does it mean when we say that there is no transparent relationship between the subject and the object? As we already mentioned it, Merleau-Ponty starts from Husserlian ideas that are «givenness through sketches (*Abschattungen*)» and the «horizon» of perception, which he *radicalizes* to constitute his own thoughts on the indeterminate nature of transcendence. The idea is that we experience transcendence anytime we perceive through sketches, that is anytime we perceive, because the object is never experienceable in its fullness. In a working note of September 1959 Merleau-Ponty illustrates this with the famous example of the vision of a cube, which is also taken from Husserl. We never see all the faces of a cube, one face is always hidden, and this is precisely what gives «transcendence» to it. Transcendence is identified here with «distance», a distance that is not interpreted as a gap, or as emptiness, but as an excess.

In the same way, we never perceive something except on the background of inner and outer «horizons», which transcend the genuinely given in any momentary presentation of the object in perception and contribute to its sense. In this respect, the world, which is the horizon of all our experiences, is never identical with what we perceive, it is always «other», it is the unfathomable condition of the possibility of our experiences. By contrast with Husserl, for who these facts do not contradict the possibility of the constitution of things by consciousness, Merleau-Ponty defines transcendent as what «remains, to some extent, un-constituable»⁴⁶. Transcendence is thus *essentially* characterized by the joint concepts of «distance, excess and negativity»⁴⁷.

What is vitally important then, is that since the constitution cannot be total, the reduction cannot be either. To renounce idealism while preserving transcendentalism implies to say that the transcendental intention to disclose the conditions for the possibility of experience can never be *totally* fulfilled. Thus, the Merleau-Pontian reform of transcendentalism consists in a new «modest» interpretation of reduction as well as constitution, and so of the transcendental subject as well as the transcendent object. To give reality its reality back –i.e. its otherness and its exteriority– also implies giving subjectivity its subjectivity back –that is its relative situation and the particularity and limitations of its point of view. As Merleau-Ponty writes it in *The Primacy of Perception*:

⁴⁵ The fact that a reform of the Husserlian transcendental is necessary both epistemologically and ontologically is argued by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his later work, but also, as we have already suggested it, in a different way, by BENOIST (2012). The latter holds that even if it is interesting to circumscribe Husserlian idealism to the field of the phenomenology of knowledge (as Rudolf Bernet does for example), to the extent that it allows one to precisely study *in this field* the subtleties of Husserl's treatment of the question of reality, it underestimates the metaphysical range of the Husserlian thesis about reality (notably in the *Ideen*).

⁴⁶ ZIELINSKI (2008), p. 221. The translation is ours. In this regard it seems possible to hold that *objects, by opposition to things*, are constituted, and are therefore not transcendent.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

I grasp myself, not as a constituting subject which is transparent to itself, and which constitutes the totality of every possible object of thought and experience, but as a particular thought, as a thought engaged with certain objects, as a thought in act; and it is in this sense that I am certain of myself.⁴⁸

I grasp myself, I have the idea of my subjectivity, or consciousness, by the means of reflection. But every reflection has limitations, for there is no reflection that would not leave anything unreflective (*irréfléchi*): it is always «reflection-on-an-unreflective-experience»⁴⁹. For that reason, the subject can grasp itself only as a reflection in action, engaged in the world, which is always partly *obscure to itself*, notably because it has a body and belongs to a natural world, of which it cannot have any exhaustive knowledge. Even if, as a consciousness, «I certainly do not exist in the way in which things exist», I'm 'in a situation', in a body, in a social and cultural context and my being cannot be anything except a 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger's influence is of course manifest in this last expression). Hence, the Merleau-Pontian reform of the concept of «transcendent» goes logically hand-in-hand with a reform of the notion of «transcendental». Merleau-Ponty attempts to provide a correct definition of this at the end of *The Phenomenology*:

We have discovered, with the natural and social worlds, the truly transcendental, which is not the totality of constituting operations whereby a transparent world, free from obscurity and impenetrable solidity, is spread out before an impartial spectator, but *that ambiguous life* in which the forms of transcendence have their *Ursprung*, and which, through a fundamental contradiction, puts me in communication with them, and on this basis makes knowledge possible.⁵⁰

This new definition seems to be in line with Merleau-Ponty's conception of transcendent: as the «truly transcendental» is ambiguous and opaque to itself, I can grasp everything that I can think of only by a reflection-on-an-unreflective-experience, so that there is no object that would be freed from all obscurity. From that point of view, the scientific ideal of total objectivity can be nothing but... an ideal that we will never realize but that we tend to approach. The classical ideal of total clarity and transparency has to be renounced for both objects and subjects, for transcendent objects as well as transcendental subjects. It could seem that we now have the appropriate tools to criticize the ontological reductionism of naturalism without falling into the trap of an idealism of transparency or idealist transcendentalism. As we will attempt to show, the problem is that it is an exceedingly difficult if not impossible task to strike idealism from transcendental phenomenology.

The Solidarity of Naturalism and Transcendentalism

Merleau-Ponty's Good Version of Transcendentalism?

⁴⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY (1964), p. 22.

⁴⁹ MERLEAU-PONTY (2002), p. 72.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 425.

Does the Merleau-Pontian reform of the notions of transcendental and transcendence permit an adequate phenomenological criticism of naturalism? As we outlined in the second part of this paper, the main problem of naturalism is the fact that it is underpinned by a surreptitious transformation of scientific method into a thesis about true reality – ‘objectivism’. In this respect Husserl’s transcendentalism adequately confronts naturalism insofar as it confronts objectivism. It shows that objects are not the ultimate components of reality but merely some entities that we can isolate in it. For Husserl, the real sense of things is not objective but ‘subjective’ in the non-idealistic meaning of the term. The objectivity of nature has thus been deposed from its ontological primacy. As we tried to show above, the difficulty is that Husserl’s way out of the blind alley of objectivism seems to lead us into another blind alley, which is the *idealism of transparency* and results from the constituency of the sense of the world by consciousness. From this point of view, Merleau-Ponty’s reform of transcendence and transcendental may be considered as an attempt to confront objectivism (which is one of his philosophical targets since his earlier work, *The Structure of Behavior*) while renouncing all idealism of transparency and so all idealist transcendentalism. It therefore argues against the idea that reality is made of objects, without asserting that its sense is (in principle at least) transparent to any subject.

With regard to the criticism of naturalism, what is crucial in this philosophy is that it is motivated by the requirement to renounce the idea of complete «constitution» and correlatively of complete «reduction». For if neither constitution nor reduction can be complete, instead of reversing the ontological status of subject and object, Merleau-Pontian philosophy seems to show a kind of *indeterminacy* of the sense of reality. From this perspective, the mistake of naturalism is that it claims to tell us more about what reality and truth are than what it is authorized to do. Read in this perspective, Merleau-Pontian transcendental philosophy appears to be first and foremost a critical philosophy, and not a constructive or foundationalist one. For him, the whole sense of reality cannot be constituted by consciousness, and therefore his main idea is that reality is always «other» to some extent, than what we say about it: no series of objects can profess to encompass the *whole* world, no views can relate the *whole* truth about reality or claim to be «the *only* avenue to truth». As Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

Philosophy is not science, because science believes it can soar over its object and holds the correlation of knowledge with being as established, whereas philosophy is the set of questions wherein he who questions is himself implicated by the question.⁵¹

In a word, the mistake of naturalism would be naïveté. The remedy that Merleau-Ponty himself suggests (as we noted in the first part of this paper, he is not a philosopher who is anti-science) is to dispense with, as some scientists do already, «the illusion of the absolute view from above»⁵².

The problem is that it has not been fully determined whether Merleau-Pontian philosophy is really the totally non-idealist critical philosophy that it aims to be. And it is really important because it cannot be the critical philosophy it is without being a non-idealist one. As we have already remarked, the claim that the sense of the world cannot be

⁵¹ MERLEAU-PONTY (1968), p. 27. Henceforth, *The Visible*.

⁵² *Ibid.*

transparent to any form of consciousness (and so to any scientific consciousness) is necessarily connected with the idea that no reduction can be either, that is to say, that philosophy cannot disclose the ultimate conditions for the possibility of experience. However, even though until the end of his life Merleau-Ponty clearly exhibited a motivation to reform his concept of «transcendental», it seems to us that he failed to achieve this goal, for reasons that we will try to explain and which may be essential to (transcendental) phenomenology itself.

The Quest for a Truly Non-Constitutive Transcendental

As a matter of principle, if there is no complete reduction, then philosophy cannot disclose all the conditions for the possibility of experience and phenomenology must renounce any form of constitutive or idealist transcendental. With regard to the latter, Merleau-Pontian philosophy went through a number of different stages: in *The Visible* the French philosopher himself criticized the «transcendental» that he had earlier defined in *The Phenomenology* as being not (yet) the «truly transcendental» which he had claimed it to be⁵³. The «truly transcendental» is defined in his second book as being neither psychological immanent nor even transcendental immanent, but the momentum by which the subject transcends itself and opens out on its own field of transcendence. Indeed, as there is «no realm in which my consciousness is fully at home and secure against all risk of error»⁵⁴, there is no realm of immanence anymore, and the transcendental can be nothing else than a momentum of transcendence, «active transcendence», «ek-stase». This momentum is an «operative intentionality», that is the pre-reflective form of intentionality beneath the «intentionality of act» that makes it possible and «produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life»⁵⁵.

What is important for us now is that this momentum is identified with time in this book: not with objective and *constituted time* but with *constituting time*, which «is the one single movement appropriate to itself in all its parts»⁵⁶. Because Merleau-Ponty equates time with operative intentionality, he also equates time with absolute subjectivity, that is to say «truly transcendental»: «I am myself time, a time which ‘abides’ and does not ‘flow’ or ‘change’»⁵⁷. But Merleau-Ponty contradicts himself on this matter. He maintains that the «truly transcendental» is time, that I do not create and that is «constitutive» of me, but he furthermore supports the thesis that time «provides me with the means of grasping myself at a distance and establishing my own reality as myself»⁵⁸. Do I constitute time or does time constitute me? This is an ambiguity pertaining to the nature of the transcendental that Merleau-Ponty will subsequently criticize and highlight in *The Visible*.

⁵³ On the Merleau-Pontian reform of the Husserlian transcendental, and the different stages of this reform, see KELLY (2010).

⁵⁴ MERLEAU-PONTY (2002), p. 438.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. xx.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 487. For the Merleau-Pontian identification of subjectivity and time, see the chapter «Temporality» in *The phenomenology of perception*, pp. 476-503.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 489.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 496.

What is really crucial for his philosophy? It is the idea that, just as the transcendent cannot be completely constituted, so too the transcendental cannot be constitutive. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty is going to push aside the active element of transcendental-time by insisting on the fact that time is, like everything, not identical to itself, but first and foremost defined by separation (*écart*) and depth (*profondeur*): it is «not an absolute series of events [...] it is [...] a system of equivalences»⁵⁹. From that point of view, as Michael Kelly argues, «The present is not privileged over the past; the past is not privileged over the present; immanence is not privileged over transcendence. They co-exist in simultaneity as a system of equivalences, the truly transcendental or transcendental field»⁶⁰. As a result, if the truly transcendental is defined as a system, it can never be identical to itself, or be completely present to itself, and it can never be totally expressed: its sense is inexhaustible. This later Merleau-Pontian reform of the notion of time and transcendental shows that, according to the French philosopher, it is crucial to get rid of any remainder of constitution or idealism in phenomenology: transcendental itself cannot be defined and transcendental philosophy cannot ever be completed.

This is actually one of the main themes of the first chapter of *The Visible*, where Merleau-Ponty gives us a splendid critical meditation on the possibility of reflection. The problem of reflection is that it always has «its own mainspring»⁶¹, that it can never see in full light: at the moment when it turns over onto itself, there is some unreflected left. From that point of view, every reflective philosophy «is a thought travelling a circle where the condition and the conditioned, the reflection and the unreflected, are in a reciprocal, if not symmetrical, relationship»⁶². In these comments, Merleau-Ponty seems to claim the impossibility of a complete reflection or reduction. However, there remains in this chapter some hope of a complete reflection, which Merleau-Ponty calls «hyper-reflection» (*sur-réflexion*):

In other words, we are catching sight of the necessity of another operation besides the conversion to reflection, more fundamental than it, of a sort of *hyper-reflection* (*sur-réflexion*) that would also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account.⁶³

Such an assertion manifests a remnant of idealist hope in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, a remnant of hope to see the world as it is and to make it say what (Merleau-Ponty points out: «in its silence») *it means*. The idea persists that we could discover and say what 'the real sense of the world' is. There seems to persist some hope of a complete reflection, which would include its own conditions of possibility, some hope of a complete disclosure of the conditions of possibility of experience, and so a form of transcendental idealism. In his text Merleau-Ponty himself clearly says that he is not sure if this project is realizable, but the alternative is for him when he writes *The Visible* (which, as is worth recalling, remained incomplete), between a dogmatic reflection and this «hyper-reflection». Either reflection is dogmatic, or it encompasses itself: an idealistic conception of reflection (and hence of the transcendental) seems to underpin this

⁵⁹ MERLEAU-PONTY (1968), p. 184.

⁶⁰ KELLY (2010), p. 113.

⁶¹ MERLEAU-PONTY (1968), p. 34.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 35.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 38.

alternative. According to us, this demonstrates that Merleau-Ponty himself never gave up, or never had time to give up entirely, some kind of idealistic transcendentalism.

The Idealist Guild of Naturalism and Transcendentalism

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project was supposed to open the way to a phenomenological criticism of naturalism that would not be, as we can diagnose Husserl's philosophy to be, idealist. To accomplish his project, Merleau-Ponty elaborates upon a definition of a transcendence which is indeterminate, of a transcendental which is not constitutive or absolute and of a transcendent which is not constituted or even constituable. This is the heart of Merleau-Ponty's criticism towards Husserl. As we just tried to show, the problem is that Merleau-Ponty does not seem to have fulfilled his project because he failed to totally renounce a complete reflection that would lead to the 'true meaning' of the world. From this point of view, we can discern in Merleau-Ponty's own philosophy a kind of idealism that he additionally vehemently criticized (which is of course not meant to be ironic, but may be only the sign of the difficulty that philosophers have to free themselves from the problematic fields in which they have been born and bred). To conclude this paper, we would like to suggest one last idea: one of the reasons why Merleau-Ponty did not manage to overcome idealism may be that he did not give up the concepts of «transcendence», «transcendent» and «transcendental».

As we have already pointed out, in the final Merleau-Pontian definition of transcendence, it is not opposed to immanence anymore, but is a dimension of it. This question is of course related to the whole ontology (inspired by Heidegger's concept of nothingness and by Hegel's dialectic) that Merleau-Ponty established at this time. In this ontology, being is not thought of as absolute positivity anymore, it is always open to something other: being only gives itself in negativity. In opposition with what is posited in negativist (or positivist) thought, there is an «inherence of being in nothingness and of nothingness in being»⁶⁴. To that extent, it seems more legitimate to say that there is no immanence anymore⁶⁵ than to assert that there is «transcendence in immanence»⁶⁶. If it is not possible anymore to isolate a realm of real immanence, then the distinction between immanence and transcendence becomes delegitimized. For the word «transcendence» comes from the Latin *transcendere*, which means «to overcome, to go up by passing beyond, to surpass», and from a theological context. Transcendence is essentially opposed to immanence –which means «what remains in»–, in the same way that what is beyond, exterior and superior is opposed to what is interior and has its principle in itself. Therefore, the word «transcendence» only means something when contrasted with the word «immanence», and conversely. What is the point then of continuing to talk about «transcendence» if the concept of «immanence» does not refer to anything anymore? Does it not preserve implicitly the ideal of immanence, and the idealist and positivist conception of being that is related to it? This is nonetheless what Merleau-Ponty is doing when he writes for example in November 1959:

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 73.

⁶⁵ Cf. footnote n. 54.

⁶⁶ This is a Husserlian expression that A. Zielinski uses to summarize Merleau-Ponty's ontology. As we are going to soon show, this expression seems to be, unfortunately, respectful of Merleau-Ponty's conception of transcendence.

Must one not say that the idea of transcendence = adjourns *ad infinitum* all that which we think we touch or see?

No, however, the visible, which is always “further on”, is presented as such.⁶⁷

Merleau-Ponty of course critically employs the concept of «transcendence», he uses it to undermine a certain positivist understanding of «immanence» and «being». But by doing so he does not completely overcome this positivist mode of thought. As there can be negativity only by contrast with positivity, when Merleau-Ponty calls nothingness and negativity that which *is*, he relies on an idealistic conception of being and positivity – which he criticizes, of course, but that continues by means of his own words. To that extent we can argue that all notions of transcendence, and not only Merleau-Ponty’s conception of it, presuppose a positivist thought of being, which also seems to be shared by «objectivism» and by «naturalism», for which objects are pure and absolute positivities. So naturalism and transcendentalism would be two opposing brothers, two rival members of the same guild or family, which is the idealist guild of the positivist conception of being. Both concepts seem to be intertwined and interdependent.

To Conclude: How to Get Out of the Realm of Idealism?

Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have done much to highlight in many aspects of human thought (naturalism, objectivism or even Sartrean phenomenology) the presence of an unquestioned and naïve conception of being, which is a positivist conception of it that we can call, in accordance with Merleau-Ponty, «idealism». As we have attempted to show, it seems that Merleau-Ponty himself, who kept talking in transcendental terms, did not manage to get out of this realm of «idealism». And contrary to what Jean-François Lavigne maintains, for example, it seems to us that there cannot be any transcendental phenomenology that would not be idealist. For to not be idealist is to renounce transparency and therefore, to some extent, immanence and so transcendence and transcendental. A real reform of the transcendental would then be a way out the transcendental.

Finally, if phenomenology seems to be a tremendous tool to criticize the ontological presuppositions of naturalism –Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy would have, on that subject, first and foremost a *critical* significance–, it seems that to criticize naturalism without continuing to adopt an unquestioned conception of being, we must find an alternative way out of the guild of positivism and objectivism, idealism and naturalism. Could the solution be Wittgenstein’s claim that we must renounce all constitutive ambitions and limit ourselves to description? Is grammar our way out of the transcendental? The difficulty of course is that by giving up the form of «idealism» that we have sketched, we also seem to be giving up a form of rationalism. Does the appeal to Wittgenstein amount to a shift toward scepticism? Or, on the other hand, does grammar indeed constitute a way out the transcendental? Could we not claim that grammar itself is a form of the transcendental? Unless transcendentalism does not characterize concepts themselves but

⁶⁷ MERLEAU-PONTY (1968), p. 217.

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only our way of considering them? To strike at the root of idealism is definitely a task that requires perseverance.

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