

The Autonomy of Reason and the Identity of Phenomenology: Material Phenomenology in Question

This paper intends to question phenomenology's identity and shifts in functions, in a systematic manner, from its conception of reason.

One will first argue that the general identity of phenomenology in opposition with sciences and natural sciences, rests upon a "sensibilization" of reason. Phenomenology's rationality constitutes itself by refusing an objective rationality that would be wrested from sensible experience. The only way for reason to access phenomena as "life" or "perception" is to regain its own lively and sensible dimension — to become a "*logos* of the aesthetics world"¹ in Husserl, to melt into the senses and structures of perception in Merleau-Ponty² or, more radically, to appear to itself as life's originary self-affection in Henry³.

However, this first movement comes along with the opposite tendency of reason to free itself from sensibility and to regain its autonomy. An autonomization that, as one will argue, constitutes an internal principle of division within historical phenomenology, and the source of a tension between its different functions. One will distinguish three different forms and instances of this autonomy.

—The *objective autonomy of reason*. Phenomenology as a "descriptive psychology", in the *Logical Investigations*, still serves a "pure logic" that seeks to elucidate reason's infinite objectivity⁴.

—The *transcendental autonomy of reason*. The return to the lifeworld, in the *Crisis*, ends up in the description of life's pure and transcendental operations⁵.

—The *affective autonomy of reason*. The return to reason's originary affectivity, in the *Essence of Manifestation*, leads to the very autonomization of affectivity, now conceived as a pure and non-sensible self-affection⁶.

One will eventually focus on Michel Henry's paradigmatic expression of this tension, in order to question the relevance of the "*material*" identity and function of phenomenology. On the one hand, material phenomenology pushes to its limits reason's sensibility and accomplishes phenomenology's radical identity and function. Essence gains its most material and corporeal dimension, becoming the originary "how" of manifestation or life's affectivity. On the other hand, phenomenology still assumes the function of a "first philosophy" which seeks for the essence's absolute autonomy. This leads to the very autonomization of affectivity — now conceived as a non-sensible self-affection — and subverts the phenomenological relevance of these descriptions. Can a material phenomenology be refunded independently of this function? Can the description of the essence's radical materiality be freed from the quest of its *selbständigkeit* or autonomy?

¹ cf. E. Husserl, *Hua XVII : Formale und transzendente Logik*, ed. E. Ströker, F. Meiner, Hamburg, 1992.

² cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Œuvres, Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris, 2010 ; cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le primat de la perception*, Editions Verdier, Paris, 1996.

³ cf. M. Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, Puf, Paris, 1963.

⁴ cf. E. Husserl, *Hua XVIII : Logische Untersuchungen, Erster Band, Prolegomena zur reinen Logik*, ed. E. Ströker, F. Meiner, Hamburg, 1992 ; *Hua XIX/1 : Logische Untersuchungen, Zweiter Band, Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis, Erste bis fünfte Untersuchung*, ed. E. Ströker, F. Meiner, Hamburg, 1992.

⁵ cf. E. Husserl, *Hua VI : Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, édité par E. Ströker, F. Meiner, Hamburg, 1992.

⁶ cf. M. Henry, *L'essence de la manifestation*, op.cit.