



BA Thesis
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A Search for Essence

Phenomenology as a Study of the Essential Structures of
Subjectivity

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Abstract

What is the essence of subjectivity and how do we go about finding it? How can we talk about the essential structures of our subjective experience of the world from within that very subjectivity? Is there such an essence? And if there is, why is it important? Edmund Husserl considered his phenomenology to be a way to uncover and study these essential structures, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty continued and extrapolated on that work. Their goal was to analyze the world from the individual, first-person perspective, to philosophize from the basis of experience. This thesis will explore the role of essence in their philosophy, why it is such an important concept to them, how it connects with other key concepts, and, most of all, how it should be understood in the context of their philosophy. It will consider whether there is an essentialism inherent in phenomenology, and if so, to what degree. Ultimately, this is an analysis of Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology with essence as its starting point. I will introduce the reader to phenomenology, where it is coming from, where it is going, and how it should be understood. This analysis will lead the reader to what I consider to be the goal of phenomenology: to construct a conceptual framework that allows us to accurately understand the world as experienced by us and to mediate that understanding.

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1 Introduction

This is a thesis on phenomenology as a search for essence. It is meant to show to what degree essentialism is implemented in the western phenomenological tradition as it is put forth by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and why it is such an important concept to these two thinkers. I will present its relation to other significant concepts such as perception, intentionality, and phenomena, in as clear and precise language as I can. I will also look at connections to ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Sextus Empiricus to place the discussion in a historical context. Ultimately, I want this thesis to clarify to the reader how essence should be understood in a phenomenological context: not as an ontological unit but as a means to an end, a way to describe our own existence and experience of the world as it appears to us. First, I will draw up broad definitions of essentialism and phenomenology, respectively. With that as a foundation, I will move to an analysis of essence in phenomenology by looking at primary sources such as *Logical Investigations* and *Phenomenology of Perception* along with various secondary sources. Next, I will show some historical contexts for this discussion and finally I will conclude that phenomenology uses essentialism only as a tool for descriptive purposes, without adopting an actual essentialist standpoint.

2 A Brief Overview of Essentialism and Phenomenology

2.1 Essentialism

Essentialism is not quite as easy to define as one would initially think because no definition is universally accepted, but we can begin by saying that it is the belief that some or all things have an essence or essences. The word essence carries with it a great deal of meaning, it is loaded, so to speak, with implications that call for clarity. A common understanding of essence is that it is something that resides within something else, something that provides its “holder” with properties and makes it what it is. The essence of a flower would not be its smell, beauty, or any other specific property. It would be something constant and unchanging, something intrinsic to the flowers very being so that if it would not possess this something it would not be a flower at all. The soul is an example of such an essence. The belief that the core of who we are is something other than the body/mind that is eternal and unchanging is a classic example of such an essentialism as I am describing here. The idea that a flower gets its “floweriness” from an essence is similar to Plato’s theory of forms and perhaps this common understanding of essence is derived from his theory. In short, Plato distinguished between the flawed reality of our senses and the ultimate and perfect reality of forms. These forms are the perfect manifestation of properties such as goodness, ugliness, beauty and so on, to which the reality we experience is only a facsimile. The things we perceive in everyday life get their qualities/essences from these forms in the same way the “floweriness” of the flower is attributed to something other than the flower itself.¹

A more nuanced approach to essence would be to understand it in terms of properties that are necessary for things to be that which they are, without them they would be something else or cease to exist entirely. A distinction is made between *essential properties* and *accidental properties* because not all properties are necessary in this way. Some properties could be different or lacking. Essentialism therefore makes a modal claim that some properties are necessary while others are accidental or contingent. For example, we can say that a dog is necessarily an animal, there are no dogs that are not animals, a dog that is not an animal is not a dog. Being an animal is a necessary property of being a dog. Dogs also have a tail, but a dog that has no tail is still a dog, so, the

¹ Kraut, “Plato.”

property of having a tail is not essential. Now, saying that the essence of being a dog is being an animal does not tell us much we do not already know. What many essentialisms aim to achieve is to reveal essences that broaden our understanding.²

Essentialism faces some difficulties when it comes to defining what essence is and what its relations are to the holder. For example, there is a difference in talking about “essences” versus talking about “essential properties,” which becomes clear when we change the sentence “being an animal is the essence of being a dog” to “being an animal is an essential property of being a dog.” The first sentence gives the impression that the essence characterizes the entire being of its holder, that it is the very core of what it is. The second sentence states that while the essential property is necessary it does not exclude other essential properties or imply that it is the core of its being. In either case, there is a need to clarify how the essence operates; how it is able to characterize that which it is an essence of.

2.2 Phenomenology

Just like with essentialism, there is no one true way to describe phenomenology, but there are some things most phenomenologists will agree on. First, as the name suggests, phenomenology studies phenomena. Phenomena are what we experience as the world around us, they are the manifestation of objects when we approach them with our senses. In other words, they are the objects *as they appear to us*. This is an important point because phenomenology does not distinguish between an ultimate reality and appearances. The phenomenal world, or the life-world as it is called, is the world we live in every day and experience as reality. This world of phenomena is not to be understood as some illusion or cover for something hidden behind it that we have no access to. Rather, it is how the world presents itself to us.³ As Heidegger explains it in *Being and Time* phenomena should be understood “from the very beginning as the self-showing in itself.”⁴ Meaning, a phenomenon is something that shows itself, rather than only appearing to us as something other than what it is.

² Robertson Ishii and Atkins, “Essential vs. Accidental Properties.”

³ Zahavi, *Fyrirbærafræði*, 13.

⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 27.

What any study of phenomena entails is the first-person perspective. Phenomena cannot show themselves unless there is something they can show themselves to. They can only be experienced from the first-person perspective and therefore the first-person perspective is of great importance to phenomenology. Phenomenology studies the structures of consciousness because phenomena are dependent on it for their existence. In fact, phenomena can be understood as a coming together of consciousness and the world. There is never a phenomenon that is not influenced by the consciousness which perceives it. Looking at a simple box on the floor will not be the same exact experience for two different individuals. Perhaps they are standing on opposite sides, seeing different sides of the box, perhaps one of them knows what is in the box but the other does not. Phenomena cannot be studied in isolation and neither can consciousness, because its interest to phenomenology is as “the stage on which the world appears.”⁵⁶

The importance of studying phenomena and the first-person perspective becomes clear if we think about them in these terms: all of our knowledge is founded in the life-world. The life-world is the world as lived and experienced by us, there is nothing outside of it (at least nothing we have access to) and it therefore serves as a foundation for knowledge, meaning, value, everything that connects the individual to what is around him. Even a scientist studying particles he cannot perceive with his bare eyes conducts his study within the life-world and all of his findings are within it as well. Phenomenology urges us to theorize from the basis of our experience because it is the only solid foundation. It urges us to forego presumptions that have not been verified in experience. These are presumptions that, according to the creator of modern phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, the sciences are guilty of making. Husserl saw this as a crisis in the sciences of his time and his work was both a criticism of and an attempt to solve this crisis. He thought that scientific discoveries were without justification because they were built on presumptions that they themselves were unable to verify.⁷

Husserl devised a way to bridge the gap between experience and scientific research. After all, if the scientific method was unable to achieve this, a new method was needed. This method is composed of a few steps that are supposed to allow the researcher to view his own experience in as clear a light as possible, without presumptions that

⁵ Zahavi, *Fyrirbærafræði*, 19.

⁶ Zahavi, 17–19.

⁷ Zahavi, 29–33.

Husserl refers to as the *natural attitude*. In short, the natural attitude is temporarily suspended so that *essential features* of experience may reveal themselves without being clouded by purely theoretical preconceptions. These essential features should help us understand our experience and connection with the world. This method is referred to as the phenomenological reduction.⁸

⁸ Zahavi, 23–27.

3 Phenomenology as a Study of Essence

A phenomenology that concerns itself with essence is often referred to as *transcendental phenomenology*. Other variants exist such as the hermeneutical phenomenology introduced by Martin Heidegger. This thesis will focus only on transcendental phenomenology (simply referred to as phenomenology from here on) as it is put forth by Husserl and developed by Merleau-Ponty. There are several reasons for this choice. They are arguably the two most influential phenomenologists in the western contemporary tradition. Merleau-Ponty saw himself as continuing the development of Husserl's work,⁹ so they should hopefully complement each other and avoid any confusing contradictions. And finally, a limited scope is necessary to this thesis since a single unifying theory of phenomenology does not exist, so for this discussion to be intelligible the context must be clear and limited.

In the preface to *Ideas I* Husserl describes phenomenology as being a science of the essence of subjectivity.¹⁰ This same description is used by Merleau-Ponty in his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*: "Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example."¹¹ It is a central concept in phenomenology and features prominently with other influential thinkers such as Heidegger and Stein. Phenomenology does not attempt to find the essence of a flower or any other object for that matter, this is already clear from Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's descriptions. According to these two thinkers, their search for essence is not a search for some *thing* to be described with language for to do so would be to reduce it to "things said."¹² In other words, it separates essence from that which it is an essence of and thereby it becomes an arbitrary description that is unfit for the phenomenological objective.

As we will see, the key to understanding essence in phenomenology is understanding what it is that phenomenology aims to achieve. Husserl understood essence to be the ideal structure of any factual thing or event and his eidetic reduction¹³ was his

⁹ Romdenh-Romluc, *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*, 14–15.

¹⁰ Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, xxxvi.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.

¹² Merleau-Ponty, xvii.

¹³ There are different reductions with different objectives, but they all share the same core structures. The "phenomenological" or "Husserlian" reduction refers to these structures. The "transcendental"

means to reveal this domain.¹⁴ If we examine this briefly it might appear that Husserl is speaking from the perspective of transcendental idealism¹⁵, at least to some degree. In other words, if we understand “factual things” as meaning that which can be empirically proven through the use of our senses, and “ideal structures” as being not properties but some core nature that *makes* factual things appear to us as factual things, then we could draw the conclusion that the ideal structures appear to us as factual things but not as they are themselves. We could say that factual things are how essences appear to us and Husserl’s theory would therefore be a representative theory.

This interpretation of Husserl is not far from the truth but is, at the same time, a misunderstanding. Phenomenology is not aimed at objects but at the first-person experience. Its primary objective is not to give an ontological account¹⁶ of things. Furthermore, Husserl viewed epistemology as first philosophy.¹⁷ This tells us a lot about where Husserl is coming from. He begins from the first-person perspective, the being-in-the-world, because the world as it appears to us is something we cannot doubt. When he calls essence the ideal structure of factual things, these factual things are not objects or events happening in an external world that is independent of the observer, they are very much dependent on being experienced. An ideal structure, then, is not the structure of an object or event but has to do with the experience. Perhaps more specifically, it has to do with *essential components* of experience.

3.1 Husserl’s Theory of Perception

When we talk about experience and phenomena we are also talking about perception. The world we perceive is the phenomenal world, the life-world, and this is what we refer to as experience.¹⁸ It is important that we have some insight into perception from a phenomenological point of view. What we must remember is that a

reduction refers to a fixation on the consciousness itself, while the “eidetic” reduction refers to a fixation on essences.

¹⁴ “Transcendental Idealism,” 284.

¹⁵ A doctrine by Immanuel Kant that is highly disputed, but states roughly that our experience is not of the world as it is, but only as it appears to us.

¹⁶ Ontology is the science of being, to give an ontological account is to state how, and to which degree something exists. Categorizing into groups of entities is a common practice in ontology.

¹⁷ Philipse, “Transcendental Idealism,” 268.

¹⁸ There are, of course, other types of experiences such as the experience of inner thoughts and emotions. Here I am referring to experience of the world around us.

phenomenological theory of perception is not akin to any scientific model of perception such as one might find in fields like neural psychology. What this means is that perception from a phenomenological point of view is not a *measurement* of any kind, but a theory based solely on an individual, first-person experience. With that in mind, we can look at Husserl's view on perception as it is put forth in the *Investigations* with support from an analysis by Herman Philipse, in hope of getting some clarity to what phenomenological essence is.

Philipse's analysis leads to what he calls a projective theory which, although not an idealism in the strictest sense, claims that our experience of an "outer" world is an illusion of otherness or independent existence.¹⁹ This is not to say that Husserl rejects the external world since, at the same time, he does claim that objects are bodily "given" to us. In a sense, Husserl is walking a fine line between realism and idealism. He does not say that external reality is a figment of our minds, nor does he say that the contents of our minds are simply given to us. Rather, he sees the external world as offering us building blocks out of which we can make objects. These objects are therefore not "outside" of us, it is only in our minds that they are objects. The illusions consist of this displacement where we view them as external, as residing in a world outside of us.²⁰

"If we imagine a consciousness prior to all experience, it may very well have the same *sensations* as we have. But it will intuit no things, and no events pertaining to things, it will perceive no trees and no houses, no flights of birds nor any barking of dogs. One is at once tempted to express the situation by saying that its sensations *mean* nothing to such a consciousness, that they do not *count as signs* of the properties of an object, that their combination does not count as a sign of the object itself. They are merely lived through, without an objectifying *interpretation* derived from experience."²²

Essentially, a consciousness is given signs from which an object is constructed, but only if said consciousness has the means to interpret the given signs. As I have said before, Husserl was not a representationalist and the object perceived is therefore not a representation of the given sensation. It should rather be understood as *relata* that in the process of perception structures the phenomenon. The thing-in-itself is then understood

¹⁹ Philipse, "Transcendental Idealism," 265–66.

²⁰ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 214.

²¹ Philipse, "Transcendental Idealism," 266.

²² Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 214.

much differently than in thinkers like Kant.²³ It is not something behind the phenomenon but the phenomenal object in its entirety. The limit to which we can perceive an object is evident in everyday life: we can only perceive it from a given angle and therefore only a part of it is revealed to us. The thing-in-itself is, therefore, always hidden from us as a whole, but all parts of it are still available to us, only not at the same time.²⁴ We can only see one side of a box at a time and when we turn it that side is hidden and another is revealed. If we smell it or taste it yet another side of this box reveals itself to us, in accordance with how we approach it. If we examine its atomic composition yet another. So, the thing-in-itself according to Husserl is the entire being of a given phenomenal object that is entirely available to us and will reveal itself in accordance with our approach.

As I said before, phenomenology is not concerned with the essence of objects but of subjectivity. So why is it important to understand Husserl's theory of perception to understand the essence of subjectivity? The answer is that being subjective means being connected to the world. Perception, whether it is visual, auditory or in any other form, is how we connect with the world and if we want to speak about the essential structures of subjectivity, we must have a clear view of what perception is. So far, we have a pretty good idea, but where, in the process of perceiving the world, can we find these essential structures? We can illustrate this with an example: you experience a particular object, let us say it is a car. Within that experience there are all the particular properties of this car. It may be blue, have four wheels and headlights. Some of these properties may be essential *to this particular car*, but they are not essential to a "car experience." There are many other cars around and they may share none of these properties, but they are still experienced as a car. According to Husserl's theory of perception, experiencing a car does not mean that you have simply received some input that is a car, or that the car is entirely your own output. "Car" is a meaning that you have designated to a certain type of experience. A "car experience" comes as much from you as from the object, so, finding the essence of any type of experience means figuring out what components are necessary for that experience. If a car has three wheels instead of four it may still be a car, but if it has sails instead of wheels it may be experienced as something else, like a boat.²⁵ Husserl

²³ In Kant's philosophy, the thing-in-itself refers to the thing as it is, opposed to how it appears.

²⁴ Philipse, "Transcendental Idealism," 274–75.

²⁵ Romdenh-Romluc, *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*, 8–9.

tells us that “being a car” is not an intrinsic property of any object, but that when we experience certain types of objects we ourselves give them some meaning, like “being a car,” based on the properties of the object. An essential property of a “car experience,” like having four wheels instead of sails, would be essential only to that particular type of experience. An essential property of subjectivity would, however, be essential to any type of experience.

In *The World of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes this same point, perhaps even more clearly. He refers to an example made by his contemporary, Sartre. The example is of the properties of honey. Merleau-Ponty says:

“(…) every quality is related to qualities associated with other senses. Honey is sugary. Yet sugariness in the realm of taste, ‘an indelible softness that lingers in the mouth for an indefinite duration, that survives swallowing’, constitutes the same sticky presence as honey in the realm of touch. To say that honey is viscous is another way of saying that it is sugary: it is to describe a particular relationship between us and the object or to indicate that we are moved or compelled to treat it in a certain way, or that it has a particular way of seducing, attracting or fascinating the free subject who stands before us. Honey is a particular way the world has of acting on me and my body.”²⁶

This example clearly illustrates several things we have already discussed. First, that the thing-in-itself is only hidden from us in so far as we are limited in our ability to perceive it. The honey shows different properties when we perceive it in different ways, but those properties are not separate things. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “each of its qualities is the whole.”²⁷ Second, these properties are not *of the honey* but rather how the perceiver defines the honey using his senses. Honey is only sweet when someone eats it, it is only sticky if someone touches it, both of those properties are the same thing being approached differently. And third, that the perceived otherness of the honey is an illusion as the honey exists only as an experience that is defined by the perceiver.²⁸

So far, we have some idea of what essence in phenomenology is. It is not an essence of objects but of experience. Experience is our connection to the world so we can say that it is a search for the essential structures of this connection. However, the goal is not to define these essential structures in terms of what it is as a *thing*. The first point already seems clear, but the second one seems a bit strange. How is it possible to include

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 61–62.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, 62.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 60–62.

essence in the discussion without a definition of what essence is? To understand this, we must take a closer look at where phenomenology is coming from, what its objective is and how it aims to achieve it.

4 Essence as a Means to an End

Merleau-Ponty makes an important point when he declares that essence is not the goal of phenomenology, but its means.²⁹ He goes on to say that:

“Seeking the essence of consciousness will therefore not consist in developing the *Wortbedeutung*³⁰ of consciousness and escape from existence into the universe of things said; it will consist in rediscovering my actual presence to myself, the fact of my consciousness which is in the last resort what the word and the concept of consciousness mean. Looking for the world’s essence is not looking for what it is as an idea once it has been reduced to a theme of discourse; it is looking for what it is as a fact for us, before any thematization.”³¹

What he is saying is that it is of no concern to phenomenology what exactly essence is, ontologically speaking, because the subject of phenomenology is only that which becomes apparent. More specifically: in phenomenology, essences are those properties that are necessary for the existence of some particular things, but phenomenology does not make a statement about whether or not these properties are ultimately real; the only statement phenomenology makes is regarding how things appear to be. Merleau-Ponty is effectively suspending judgement about the existence of essences, not claiming their existence nor their non-existence, because were he to take a stand either way he would be going against a fundamental idea in phenomenology: he would be making a presumption about the world.

Husserl famously criticized the natural sciences of his time for basing their work on presumptions such as taking for granted the facticity of the external world.³² This is not to say that he rejected the sciences, he simply was pointing to the fact that whenever we speak of “things,” whether it is every-day talk or a scientific explanation, we are without exception speaking about phenomena:

“We must always bear in mind that *what things are* (the things about which alone we ever speak, and concerning whose being or non-being, so being or not so being, we can alone contend and reach rational decisions), *they are as things of experience*. Experience alone prescribes their meaning, and indeed, when we are dealing with things that are founded

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xvi.

³⁰ *The meaning of the word*

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xvii.

³² Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 16.

on fact, it is actual experience in its definitely ordered experirical connexions which does the prescribing.”³³

Since all things we ever concern ourselves with are things of experience, it is experience that prescribes facticity and meaning. In other words, experience is the foundation of knowledge. This stance “against” science is not only a criticism of the scientific method but, more importantly perhaps, of the worldview science has implemented into western culture. “Merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people,”³⁴ Husserl says. With this, he is pointing to the fact that science, with its objective measurements and exclusion of human values, has ignored some of the most pressing questions relevant to human existence, those of meaning. Without these questions the sciences lose significance, they become a “residual concept.”³⁵ Simply put, Husserl’s criticism of the sciences states that something has been left out because the scientific method as it is, is unable to have it as its subject. This something is of great importance not only because it is the very foundation on which knowledge rests, but also because it is of immense interest to humanity.³⁶

We can think of this as the starting point of phenomenology. Its aim is to fill this gap left by the sciences for the above-mentioned reasons. What this entails is that phenomenology is not only concerned with knowledge but with our entire conceptual framework³⁷ which has become skewed by the measuring-oriented method of the sciences. Phenomenology seeks to construct a framework that does not reduce the world to measurements but can successfully reflect it. This is what I have been calling the *phenomenological objective*.³⁸

If we recall the beginning of the preceding chapter, both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty were quoted as saying that phenomenology is about the essence of subjectivity, consciousness, and perception. To them, the word ‘essence’ is a part of this new conceptual framework. It is not something to be measured or defined as a thing in itself

³³ Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 91.

³⁴ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 6.

³⁵ Husserl, 9.

³⁶ Husserl, 6–9.

³⁷ A conceptual framework is an analytical tool used to understand a certain subject and to mediate that understanding. Football jargon can be seen as a conceptual framework. In this context, it has a very wide meaning because it refers to an enormously influential way to understand and speak about reality that has dominated the modern way of thinking.

³⁸ Romdenh-Romluc, *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*, 16.

because that would mean resorting to a framework they have rejected. ‘Essence’ is therefore not a concept of that kind but a purely phenomenological concept that is only meant to describe that which becomes apparent. For example, to say that consciousness has a particular essence is to say that it has a particular property that is essential to what consciousness is. Like the sweetness of honey, that essential property is how consciousness reveals itself or expresses itself in the world, it is not a *part* of consciousness that can be identified and studied in isolation. ‘Essence’ is not a definition but a way of speaking, a means to an end. When Merleau-Ponty claims that a new conceptual framework is needed it is because we have so far been unable to approach the subjects of phenomenology because our way of speaking, the meanings we give concepts, does not allow it. In his words: “(...) our existence is too highly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement, and that it requires the field of ideality in order to become acquainted with and to prevail over its facticity.”³⁹ The word ‘essence’ is a tool, without meaning it is useless, but infused with meaning it can further understanding. The meaning infused into it by phenomenologists is roughly: *how something necessarily reveals itself, by itself*.

4.1 Intentionality

Now that we have a reasonably clear picture of what essence is in phenomenology, we can look at an example. The most obvious and well-known example is *intentionality*. It is an essential property of consciousness. In short, consciousness is always aimed at something, its intention is always towards something specific, whether it be an object, a thought, itself, or any other possible subject. Intentionality is a complex discussion, stretching back to ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato, and we will only be able to scratch the surface of this discussion in this thesis. But we should be able to get an idea of it as an essence and how it connects to the picture we have drawn of phenomenology.

Intentionality in Husserl’s work is closely related to his theory of perception and meaning. Some commentators have even suggested that Husserl’s philosophy can be understood as a theory of intentionality. In any case, Husserl studied intentionality in

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xvi.

relation to other concepts as opposed to in isolation.⁴⁰ In the chapter on perception, we understood his theory as a projective theory: the perceived “otherness” of objects is an illusion (a car is only a car when it is perceived because the meaning comes from us and not from the actual thing itself, the “car” is therefore projected onto the thing itself). Perceiving a car is an *intentional* act where the car is the intentional object, the particular object which the consciousness holds or is aimed at. In other words, intentionality is the act of infusing perception with meaning. When we hold something in our minds, we understand it as being something specific, not just a sensation. In effect, it transcends sensation to become an object of intention. This transcendence, where meaning is infused into the sensation, is then projected outwards to give the appearance that the meaningful object is in front of us, while in reality, it lives only in our minds. Husserl’s intentionality makes a distinction between mere sensation of a physical phenomenon and the act of attributing meaning to that phenomenon and subsequently being able to see it/talk about it as a specific object.^{41,42}

The ability to give meaning to the world is an *essential property* of consciousness. But, to say that it is a property of consciousness is a bit misleading because the expression always pushes us slightly towards isolating the property both from what it is a property of and what it acts on, i.e., consciousness, on one hand, and the world, on the other hand. Another way to understand it is to think of it as a happening or a process. For this happening to take place a consciousness is needed, and that consciousness also needs to be situated in the world. It must be an embodied, experienced consciousness, for as Husserl’s example of the consciousness prior to all experience shows us, for a sensation to become an intentional object experience is needed. If we understand intentionality as a process of generating meaning, and we say that this process is an essential property of consciousness, it gives the impression that it only pertains to consciousness, while in truth it also pertains to phenomena, perception, meaning and so on.

The point I am trying to get across is that when essence is used to describe certain things in phenomenology, it is only for descriptive purposes and not to organize that which is being described into separate categories. For example, the claim that intentionality is an essential property of consciousness does in fact not mean that

⁴⁰ Hintikka, “The Phenomenological Dimension,” 78–79.

⁴¹ Philipse, “Transcendental Idealism,” 264.

⁴² Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 191–92.

intentionality is an essential property, from a phenomenological perspective. The later claim creates a category for “essential properties” and that goes far beyond only describing what is apparent. The concepts we have discussed here (consciousness, intentionality, perception, phenomena and so on) describe a process, the process of a first-person perspective connecting with the world around it, their function is only to describe it as it appears to the first-person perspective but not to organize it into separate entities. There is no other way to describe such a process than to use concepts that indicate a separation. Thus, when we think about essentialism in phenomenology, we must keep in mind the “space” phenomenology is working in, metaphorically speaking. It is all about how it is to experience, what being a consciousness in the world is.

5 A Historical Context

The point of the comparisons I will make here will be to show that the discussions present in phenomenology are not in any way new, and neither are the doctrines used to carry out these discussions. Phenomenology is no different than any other philosophical tradition in that it takes place in a continuous dialogue that we call philosophy, or the western philosophical tradition. So why should we be concerned with the ancient roots of this dialogue as opposed to something closer in time and cultural relevance, such as Kant's transcendental idealism? The answer is that the two comparisons I make here are directly relevant to the subject matter of this thesis. Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's use of the term essence can be described as a form of Aristotelian essentialism. Their method for finding essence is very similar to the ancient skeptical tradition known as pyrrhonism.

5.1 Aristotelian Essentialism

The phenomenological essentialism that I have outlined here is not in any way a new or revolutionary take on essence and can in fact be traced back all the way to Aristotle. To Aristotle, the essence of being human was to be rational. This feature of all human beings was how one should describe humans when talking about essence because this feature is the same in all cases and leads to/is explanatorily prior to many other features. His essentialism can be summed up as such: "*F* is an essential property of *x* = (i) if *x* loses *F*, then *x* ceases to exist; and (ii) *F* is in an objective sense an explanatorily basic feature of *x*."⁴³

Both (i) and (ii) are found in our discussion of phenomenology. Firstly, if we take intentionality as an example, it is a constant function of consciousness, there is never a consciousness that is not intentional. We may not think about intentionality in the same way as Aristotle's essentialism is formulated here. We would not say that if consciousness would *lose* intentionality it would cease to exist. In other words, we would not think about the existence of consciousness as depending on the existence of intentionality. We would rather think about it as being an intrinsic part of the existence of consciousness. This corresponds well enough with (i).

⁴³ Shields, "Aristotle."

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, (ii) relates to phenomenology on a deeper level because of its aim to understand and explain subjective reality. (ii) says that an essence needs to explain other features of that which it is an essence of. These other features are not essences since they are not explanatorily prior. For example, we can draw the conclusion that if all humans are rational then all humans also grasp cause and effect. Grasping cause and effect is not an essence of being human because it is a case of rationality. Rationality, however, is not a case of anything other than itself. When phenomenology searches for an essence of consciousness or subjectivity it does so because it seeks to gain further understanding, what it is for a consciousness to be or what it is to be subjective, the very thing an essence of consciousness or subjectivity has explanatory power over. It follows that knowing the essence of consciousness is not only important, but also necessary.

Phenomenologists use a tool called *reduction* in their search for essence. In short, the everyday natural attitude towards reality is set aside so that the individual's perspective can be free of presumptions. These are presumptions that run deep in our worldview, such as the world existing and containing us, the separation of us from the world around us, and so forth. The reduction can only take place if this natural attitude is first *bracketed*, if the individual momentarily suspends all judgement about everything not experienced first-hand by himself. It is a way to step out of the noise, so to speak, so that a proper analysis of experience can take place.⁴⁴ In a description of the reduction, Merleau-Ponty says:

“It is because we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world that for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity (...) Not because we reject the certainties of common sense and a natural attitude to things (...) but because, being the presupposed basis of any thought, they are taken for granted, and go unnoticed, and because in order to arouse them and bring them to view, we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them.”⁴⁵

If we take a close look at the very last part of this reference, we see the exact reason for the reduction. It is not to cast doubt on any presupposed truth or seek some truth unrelated to them. Rather, it is to reveal why they are presupposed truths to begin with. It is tracing back our steps to get to the beginning so that we can see how we have come to where we

⁴⁴ Zahavi, *Fyrirbærafræði*, 23–25.

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xiv–xv.

are now. Exactly like Aristotle's essentialism, Merleau-Ponty believes that by revealing the essential features found in the first-person experience they will lead us to further truths otherwise unavailable to us.

Merleau-Ponty makes another important point here: that we are "through and through compounded of relationships with the world." It is important to understand that any analysis of the first-person perspective, our subjective experience, does not work if it is analyzed in isolation. In fact, it cannot even be understood at all in this way because it is entirely made up of connections with the world. Experience is a coming together of two things, that which experiences and that which is experienced. When a phenomenologist performs the reduction, he is not only looking at himself as the experiencer, nor is he only looking at what he is experiencing, he is looking at what is in between. In other words, he is looking at the connection between himself and the world. The relevance of *intentionality* becomes apparent. No matter what the first-person perspective is, it is always aimed at something, its *intention* is always towards something. This is what it means to be compounded of relationships with the world. Without these connections, the first-person perspective does not exist (intentionality fulfils (i) in our outline of Aristotle's essentialism). Intentionality also has explanatory primacy; it is not a case of anything else and at the same time it leads to further understanding⁴⁶ (fulfilling (ii) in Aristotle's essentialism).

5.2 Pyrrhonism

In *Outlines of Scepticism*, Sextus Empiricus begins his description of pyrrhonism by saying that "none of the matters to be discussed do we affirm that things certainly are just as we say they are: rather, we report descriptively on each item according to how it appears to us at the time."⁴⁷ This line of thinking echoes in phenomenology, especially through the use of the word *epoché*, which is defined by Sextus as a "standstill of the intellect, owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything."⁴⁸ The term is thought to

⁴⁶ For example, Edith Steins analysis of *empathy*. Empathy is the word she uses for our experience of other people, of two first-person perspectives experiencing each other. Empathy is therefore a case of intentionality, but intentionality is not necessarily a case of empathy.

⁴⁷ Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 3.

⁴⁸ Empiricus, 5.

originate with the Pyrrhonian tradition and is used by Husserl to refer to the phenomenological reduction.

There is, perhaps, a deeper connection between phenomenology and pyrrhonism. Sextus describes the skeptic as an investigator that sets appearances and thoughts in opposition to one another and, because of the equal force of arguments for and against each subject matter, ends up suspending judgement instead of making a presumption.⁴⁹ At the same time, Sextus also says that the skeptics “assent to the feelings forced upon them by appearances.”⁵⁰ If we understand “thoughts” to mean dogmatic presumptions about the world then comparing them to appearances makes a lot of sense. The question the skeptic is then asking is whether the ultimate reality of the world corresponds with how it appears to us. Or, perhaps more accurately, whether our presumptions about how the world ultimately is corresponds with how it appears. Pyrrhonism can be understood as a stance against dogmatism of any kind because it is ultimately based on presumptions, appearances are not based on presumptions and the skeptic can therefore *assent* to them (accept them without judgement).

If we compare this to the philosophy of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, we see a similar trend. Husserl calls out the sciences for being dogmatic and based on presumptions, he devises a method to investigate appearances using suspension of judgement as a key tool. His method is essentially to report descriptively, just as Sextus aims to do with his skepticism. Both traditions therefore set appearances above everything else, while condemning dogmatic beliefs about the world. With that said, there are several important differences that should be mentioned. For one, a phenomenological investigation does not end with suspension of judgement, it begins with it. This is important because it demonstrates the difference in attitude between the two traditions. Both types of investigations aim to discover truth, but while pyrrhonism sees this endeavor as ultimately fruitless because the only logical conclusion is invariably suspension of judgement, phenomenology sees suspension of judgement as the only successful way to discover truth and is in that sense a much more positive philosophy. Pyrrhonism effectively rules out any concrete conclusion to any subject, going so far as to even rule out suspension of judgement as the only logical conclusion, as strangely as

⁴⁹ Empiricus, 4.

⁵⁰ Empiricus, 6.

that may sound.⁵¹ Phenomenology does aim at conclusions as exemplified by the search for essence, for even though they do not posit that essence is an ultimately real entity, they do use it to come to concrete conclusions about their subject matter (for example, intentionality being an essential feature of consciousness, and using that to further develop their theories).

⁵¹ Empiricus, 6.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

In the beginning of this thesis, I stated that phenomenology does not adopt an essentialist standpoint despite the emphasis Husserl and Merleau-Ponty place on the search for essence. If we look at the broad definition of essentialism I laid out in the first chapter, we see that it is the *belief* that some or all things have an essence or essences. The question is: has this thesis fully established that the two phenomenologists do in fact not make this belief explicit in the texts I have looked at? For all intents and purposes, they do. Their writing on essence is from the point of view of someone who believes that essences exist. We have seen of what these essences are, and even looked at an example of such an essence. Yet, when it comes to an ontological commitment, they suspend judgement. Why is that?

For one, it does save them from the headache of establishing an ontological account of essences and their relations to their holders. In fact, it seems that their attitude towards ontology, exemplified best by their criticism of the scientific method, allows them to make statements without explicit justifications; that they hide behind descriptions of appearances to avoid answering to certain criticisms. Perhaps this would be a fair point were it not for the fact that their use of the term “essence” does not call for an ontological account. Their philosophy does not need a thorough definition of what essence is because it is not about essence in that sense. Furthermore, an ontological account of essence would not be phenomenological in nature exactly because by definition it is only concerned with experience from a first-person perspective. An ontological account would go beyond that scope and would need to presume the independent existence of the world which would also be un-phenomenological. When Merleau-Ponty says that phenomenology is the study of essences, it does not mean that he aims to analyze what constitutes an essence, it means that he aims to analyze the necessary properties of being in the world, perceiving it and giving it meaning.

This is reflected in the use of the term and how it functions within the discourse of phenomenology. Essences are only of things relevant to the first-person experience of the world, there are no statements concerning essences of other subject matter. An essentialist would be unlikely to draw this arbitrary line or would at least justify why only these specific things should have an essence.

Phenomenology is effectively playing by different rules. If the goal is to construct a conceptual framework better able to reflect the world as experienced by us, then the means whereby that is achieved cannot be those of conceptual frameworks that have failed at that goal. Their use of the term essence should only be understood from within that conceptual framework. If we think about the way one would go about defining a concept such as essence in ontological terms, it will not have anything to do with our first-person subjective experience because we have no experience of essence as an object. The definition would be purely theoretical and based on assumptions such as the world existing independently of us. That is not something that this new conceptual framework is meant to achieve.

This is perhaps the greatest hurdle for phenomenologists to overcome. The subject matter they wish to tackle seems to be beyond the reach of language as it is currently used and if they are to reach their goal, the effort needed is immeasurable. There are several problems that need to be considered, such as how a dialogue between phenomenology and the sciences can take place when different conceptual frameworks, different ways to speak about reality, are at work. The scientific conceptualization of the world is not invalid, the point is not to replace it. But for any other approach to be successful it must be capable of both complementing and criticizing the sciences, and vice versa.

From my point of view, this seems to be the worthiest continuation of the discussion I have presented in this thesis. The fact is that it is difficult to avoid a muddled discussion about phenomenological concepts such as essence because we approach it from a cultural background molded by scientific methodology. The modern western worldview is heavily influenced by the measure-oriented and reductionistic worldview of the sciences of our times. So, not only does our point of view fail to do phenomenology any favors, but we are also forced to use concepts that continuously insinuate meanings that are misleading. I hope this has become clear through my analysis of essence.

The main advantage phenomenology has for its proposed conceptual framework is that it should have a very solid foundation. It is meant to reflect the world as it appears to us as accurately as possible. The foundation, experience, gives it a point of reference available to everyone. Meaning, that the content of this new framework is already there, for everyone to see and know. It is just a matter of learning to step out of our measure-oriented and reductionistic worldview and learn to see the world in a different light. Of

course, this is precisely what the phenomenological reduction is for. The main disadvantage is, however, that conceptual frameworks used to understand reality are not generally constructed on purpose. They are something that evolves naturally over a long period of time, something influenced by countless cultural, environmental, technical, and historical factors. This is evident if we consider that the conceptual framework utilized by the sciences is rooted in hundreds of years of methodological development. Perhaps, a more realistic goal would be to attempt to influence the established framework.

If I were to write this thesis again, knowing what I know now, I would not make essence my starting point. I would focus on the conceptual framework and the criticism of the sciences because that is ultimately where the discussion about essence has led me; that, to me, seems to be the heart of the matter. My regrets (if I can even call them that) are that I did not get the chance to dig deeper into what I feel has turned out to be the actual subject of my thesis, and, that if I had known this, I could have taken more decisive steps to prevent a muddled discussion.

With that said, it has hopefully become clear that phenomenology does only deploy essentialism as a tool for descriptive purposes and does *not* adopt an actual essentialist standpoint. The essentialism deployed is a form of Aristotelian essentialism, and its purpose is to accurately reflect our experience of the world *as it is a fact for us*, without any reduction or measurement. The deployment of essentialism is a part of an attempt to shift our worldview away from such reductions and measurements to the world as it reveals itself to us. This constitutes a change in the dominant conceptual framework, essentially, how we use language to describe reality. Essence, in phenomenology, can only be understood in light of this.

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