

PHENOMENOLOGY AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY. HUSSERL'S CRITIQUE OF PSYCHOLOGISM AS COMMON GROUND¹

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ABSTRACT. This paper is addressing Husserl's critique of psychologism in order to gain a better understanding of an up to date phenomenological research. Starting with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology became more and more interested in how psychoanalytic theory can contribute to its findings. The latest phenomenological research reflects this growing interest in psychoanalysis. I will demonstrate in this paper that Husserl's critique of psychologism enables this interest and that the psychoanalytic theory offers the same critique in response. Thus, the *ego* problem leading to the deadlock of intersubjectivity, represent one of the common grounds phenomenology and psychoanalysis can meet. In this respect I will use the works of Marc Richir and Jacques Lacan. Emphasizing Marc Richir's conception of language as phenomenon and the twist he gives to the concept of "perceptive" *phantasia* introduced by Husserl in 1918, I will consider the concept of unconscious as a way to solve the intersubjectivity dilemma.

Keywords: *ego, intersubjectivity, "perceptive" phantasia, psychologism, transcendental interfactivity, unconscious*

Instituted in response to the growing psychologism of its time, phenomenology was meant to give an account of the subjective dimension of human experience. Far from being strictly quantifiable, human experience is pervaded by the intimate and unique dimension of subjectivity. Thus, one cannot simply assume either that the same psychological laws apply in the same way to

¹ This paper is supported by the Recurring Donor Fund (Fondul Recurent al Donatorilor), available to the Romanian Academy and managed by the "Patrimoniul" Foundation GAR-UM-2019-393C/15.10.2019

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each and every one of us, or that one's experience may be ameliorated or "improved" in virtue of such laws. To assume that would involve a certain form of naivety, in Husserlian terms.

As a matter of fact, Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction targets precisely such a naive attitude. To be more precise, he aims at suspending it in order to access a phenomenological (or transcendental) attitude, from which subjectivity is to be adequately scrutinized. As the intended method for that adequate scrutiny, the newly instituted phenomenology evolves into a "pure phenomenology", which seeks to uncover the "pure" *ego*.

At this transcendental level, Husserl faces a crucial problem: intersubjectivity. He certainly recognises it as such, and so do many of his disciples. Although he is certain of having solved the problem, not all phenomenologists agree with him.

One of his prominent critics in this respect is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who is sceptical about the very idea of a "pure" *ego* and about the ideal of purity it involves. In order to capture the rationale of this scepticism, I turn to another figure who, around the time when Husserl "invented" phenomenology, claimed to "invent" a novel method of inquiry into subjectivity and unveil a new field of knowledge: Freud and his psychoanalysis.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory emphasises a certain psychological determinism of the subject. At first sight, this is just another version of psychologism. However, for him the psychic apparatus has a special status: it is the unconscious itself. And given that the workings of the unconscious are not supposed to be the same for each and every one of us, it would be impossible to advance universally applicable psychological laws.

Merleau-Ponty reevaluates the Freudian theory of the unconscious, maintaining that the subject is not entirely transparent to itself. The *ego* is inevitably confronted with a sort of debris he cannot fully comprehend. Merleau-Ponty calls that debris *Wesen sauvage*.

Later on, Marc Richir develops the notion of *Wesen sauvages* into a key element of his theory of meaning. Since it is entangled with the unconscious, meaning is for Richir always in the making, thus never fixed or stable, as we would like to think. Because of that, language itself becomes phenomenal and has a transcendental value.

The critique of psychologism

It is a well-established phenomenological method the one of taking the obvious as a legit starting point for any research. As Husserl himself points out, when something is considered to be self-explanatory, we can be sure that there are

a multitude of misunderstandings and, nevertheless, a multitude of truths waiting to be unveiled. The illusion of knowing acts like a blanket covering all the riches of the unknown.

Such is the case with the critique of psychologism. It became so common among the phenomenologists that it may be easily considered as being self-explanatory. But, let us dig one more time into this problem and see what we can find.

I will start, again, with the obvious fact that psychologism is an *-ism*. Thus, it is an ideology. Its set of ideas is consistent with the one of the positivism of the 19th century when an afflux of the positive sciences takes place. With it, philosophy is called into question. Starting with the 19th century, "something happened" as Marc Richir observes². What exactly happened cannot be pinpointed, but there are some previous elements that can give us a hint.

Long before this moment in history... Descartes happened. What he achieved in such a revolutionary way was a return to the *ego*. In other words, "man ceased to be considered merely a creature, but, on the contrary, he is valorised as being the base for any cognition and action"³. With this move, a crack in the great metaphysical systems became visible. There were attempts to cover up this crack made by Locke or Hume, for example. Hegel was another one to try, and he also was the last great fail when trying to give an account for an absolute metaphysic. As a consequence of this failure, the only option left for philosophy was to choose between trying to find the *a priori* frames of knowledge a conscious subject is using (Kant), or to recognise the fact that any speculation regarding subjectivity is useless and solely psychology can give a rigorous discourse about this topic⁴. In either case, philosophy loses. If the first option is chosen, it means to perpetuate the desire to patch up the crack initiated by the Copernican revolution and thus return to metaphysics. If the second option is chosen, then subjectivity is left aside, meaning that Copernican revolution is ignored altogether - this amounts to returning to a pre-Cartesian metaphysics.

This is the historical moment Husserl intervenes. He acknowledges the precarious state in which philosophy is and tries to save this delicate situation. Thus, he doesn't want to give up the subjectivity issue but also rejects the attempts to reinstate the metaphysical way of thinking. In his attempt, he needs new instruments, i.e. a new working method. Of course, the new method invented by him is the phenomenological method.

² Marc Richir, *Le problème du psychologisme - Quelques réflexions préliminaires*, p. 110

³ *Idem*

⁴ Cf. Marc Richir, *op. cit.*

Husserl address his critique against psychologism for the first time in 1900 when he published the first volume of *Logical Investigations*, namely *Prolegomena to Pure Logic*. In it he tries to make clear the status of ideality and, in general, to clarify the problem of sense. Psychologism, he says, does nothing else than to obscure the ideality and its sense when pretending to explain it by empirical norms⁵. In other words, “as long as it is an empirical science, psychology is concerned with *facts* without questioning their conditions of intelligibility or the correlations of essence that envelops the facts when giving them sense.”⁶

Husserl’s conclusion is that a psychological explanation cannot have epistemological value. This blunt conclusion is not to be used as a way to disregard psychology. In my opinion, its meaning is that psychology and philosophy are two completely separated disciplines and do not compete at the same level. It is Husserl’s way of saving philosophy. By showing that psychology is not philosophy, or vice versa, he clears the path to new investigations regarding the human being that are neither explanatory nor metaphysical. Phenomenology gives an insight into the condition for possibility of sense-making, I claim following the thinking of Marc Richir.

In his theory, Jacques Lacan says about the same thing. Psychoanalysis, he says, is not so much about finding the cause of the symptom, but more about finding its *essence*, its unique feature, or its *trait unaire* as he puts it. This is the condition of possibility that plays the decisive role in someone’s life. It is also the element of uniqueness that manifests itself in sense-making. When things don’t make much sense, or don’t make any sense at all, that is usually a case for a therapy.

This therapy invented by Freud was at first as descriptive as it may be. In the beginning Freud gave long and elaborate explanations to his patients in hope that they will understand what is wrong with them and thus they will cure themselves. But that didn’t work. As said before, psychological explanations don’t have any epistemological value. In other words, it can’t give you knowledge in the sense of essential knowledge, or the knowledge of the essence. If there is such a knowledge, and how can it be acquired, remains to be seen.

Anyway, after one of his patients complained about his method and requested to be listened instead, Freud realised that listening is a key element in therapy. He then begins to develop his idea of *free-floating attention*, or *attention flottante* in French. It basically is a kind of *epoche* and requires the analyst not to pay too much attention to the words the patient is saying but to the way the words are said. In Richirian terms, this means to “listen” not the sense but the sense-making or the sense in the making (*sens se faisant*).

⁵ Marc Richir, *op. cit.*, p. 111

⁶ *Idem*

This idea of free-floating attention is very important for Jacques Lacan. When he declares himself to be a Freudian, and militates for a return to Freud, he thinks about it also. In his opinion most of the orthodox Freudians have forgotten the requirement of the free-floating attention and reiterate the same mistake Freud made at the beginning of his practice. This means that they are still trapped in psychologism.

For Lacan, psychoanalysis has nothing to do with psychology. As Husserl did long before him, he also addresses a critique of psychology. In *The Position of the Unconscious*, published in *Écrits*, he accuses psychology of being confused by the same illusion Hegel once named "the law of the heart" that results in a delusion of presuppositions⁷. "The law of the heart" or of "the good heart", as sometimes Hegel also names it, belongs to the imaginary, i.e. the register Lacan considers to be the one of duality and conflict. It is an enabler for ideality, thus it is an instrument of society, as the ideal is submitted to it. As a consequence, psychology is guided not solely by objective laws, as one may think, but by the ideal of the society, also. This, Lacan concludes, has serious consequences when it comes to knowledge. So, in a sense, what psychology knows is limited by the ideal of the society in which it develops. This is another explanation for why psychology became *psychologism*, thus ideology.

Psychoanalysis also tends to submit itself to the ideology of its time⁸, warns Lacan. The best example in that direction is the way in which the *ego* is treated by the American psychoanalysts. The idea that the *ego* must be strong, undivided and totally autonomous is consistent with the individualistic ideology which dominates in the USA. But that was not at all the idea Freud had. That's another reason why a return to Freud is needed.

The question of the *ego*

Reaching a conclusion in what regards psychologism, Husserl can go further on in the development of his idea of a new philosophy based on the phenomenological method he invented. The first step this method presupposes is, of course, the reduction of the natural attitude in order to get the transcendental attitude. It is a move that also presupposes the splitting of the *ego*; *Ichspaltung*, says Husserl.

This idea of a divided *ego* is not at all strange to psychoanalysis. Right from the beginning Freud talked about *Idealich*, i.e. ideal *ego*, and *Ich-Ideal*, i.e. ego-ideal, as two different instances of the same *ego*. He also used sometimes *Ueberich*

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p. 832

⁸ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *What it means to be contemporary?* in "What Is an Apparatus?" and Other Essays

to indicate more precisely what he meant by *Ich-Ideal*. So, the *ego*-ideal is the superego the American psychoanalysis is trying so avidly to make even stronger. Even though Freud never denied the importance of the superego, he was nevertheless precautious when dealing with it. Too much emphasis on the superego and the spectre of totalitarianism is in sight. The superego becomes tyrannical (it is its “natural” tendency to do so) and unbearable to the point of breaking the *ego* down. So, the last thing the superego needs is more encouragement...

Lacan introduces a precise distinction between these three terms: “the “ideal *ego*” stands for the idealized self-image of the subject (the way I would like to be, I would like others to see me); the *ego*-ideal is the agency whose gaze I try to impress with my *ego* image, the big Other who watches over me and propels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize; and the superego is this *same* agency in its revengeful, sadistic, punishing, aspect”⁹.

In order to better understand what Freud had in mind, and thus facilitate the revaluation of his theory, Lacan considers that it is important to comprehend the dialectic these three terms presuppose. In this respect, he introduced another factor in the becoming of the subject, namely alienation. For Lacan, the process involved in the ontogenesis of the subject is not just one of splitting the *ego*, but also one of alienating it.

The natural attitude Husserl is speaking of is a kind of alienation. He also calls the natural attitude “naive attitude”, thus one of mirroring and plain description. Thereby, for a clear view one must leave aside the “reflected light”, i.e. the images of the things, and go to their essence, namely to their identity (note that in Lacanian theory there is a clear distinction between identity and identification). That is why, in the lecture of 1925, Husserl can say about the phenomenology of the *Logical Investigations* that it is an *eidetic psychology*. The *ego* of this particular type of psychology must also be one of an eidetic nature. It must be a “pure” *ego*, namely one that is identical to itself itself and above the one who gets a series of determinations in everyday life.

Marc Richir tracks down a problem with this *Aufhebung* Husserl is proposing¹⁰. “The obvious difficulty is to know which element from the naive life will be considered as being significant by the superior *ego*”¹¹. This difficulty proves to be a tautology and opens up the path for metaphysics. Going on this road, Husserl unknowingly restores metaphysics. In the light of psychoanalytic theory, one also must ask: Isn’t this superior *ego*, this “pure” *ego*, a superego, in fact? I will leave this question open...

⁹ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (cap. 5)

¹⁰ Cf. Marc Richir, *Le problème du psychologisme - Quelques réflexions préliminaires*, p. 123

¹¹ Marc Richir, *op. cit.*, p. 118

What Husserl is asking is for *the sight to stop seeing*, Richir concludes¹². It seems to be an impossible task as it is entangled in the vicious circle of *seen* and *be seen*. But, as Merleau-Ponty already made clear, the one who sees is also seen. There is no point in choosing between the two.

The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the “reflected light”, or the rays of the world (*des rayons de monde*), coming from “the imaginary unity of being”¹³. He doesn't disregard this unity, but considers it as reflecting the “zero of being which isn't nothingness”¹⁴. This zero point of being is considered by Merleau-Ponty to be the starting point in phenomenological investigation. He thus follows Heidegger in his distance from Husserl. Heidegger recognises the irreducibility of the worldly horizon and its facticity and does not consider Being as transcendental subjectivity anymore¹⁵.

Transcendental interfacticity and *Wesen sauvages*

By focusing on Being in its worldly horizon, Heidegger develops an ontology of *Dasein* Husserl never understood. Even though Husserl was the one to realise “an ontological rehabilitation of the sensible”¹⁶, the worldly horizon remains secondary in his phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty continues, in his way, the Heideggerian approach to phenomenology. In his considerations, the problematic of solipsism and intersubjectivity leads to the conclusion that the *solus ipse* is only a fabrication as “true and transcendental solitude... takes place only if the other person is not even conceivable”¹⁷ and if there is no longer “a self to claim solitude”¹⁸. As a consequence, what the solipsist hypothesis implies is the fact that it has no *ego* and no *ipse*, thus it contradicts itself. Given these conditions, the only valid hypothesis remains the one suggesting “a primordial generality we are intermingled in” from which “myself and the others are born together through the original *extasis*”¹⁹. In short, we must assume a primordial *We*.

¹² Cf. Marc Richir, *op. cit.*, p. 120

¹³ Guy-Félix Duportail, *Une chair à réparer : le nœud manqué de Merleau-Ponty*, p. 13

¹⁴ Marc Richir *apud* Guy-Félix Duportail, *Une chair à réparer : le nœud manqué de Merleau-Ponty*, p. 13

¹⁵ Cf. Marc Richir, *Le problème du psychologisme - Quelques réflexions préliminaires*, p. 133

¹⁶ Marc Richir, *The Meaning of Phenomenology in the Visible and the Invisible*, p. 60

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *apud* Marc Richir, *op.cit.*, p. 72

¹⁸ *Idem*

¹⁹ *Idem*

I claim that Lacanian psychoanalytic theory conceives this *We*, this togetherness, as the world of language we are born in. By language he means the *experienced* language, the *lived* language that is not, strictly speaking, the vehicle of cognitive communication. The sense it involves is more like an unconscious sense, not intuited but read between the lines. To use a Richirian expression, it is the *pre-sentiment* of a sense. That is another way of saying that the desire comes from the Other, as this *We* contains its mysterious desire. Consequently, language and desire are complementary in Lacanian theory; to be born into a world of language equals to be born into a world of desire. That is how, from language, Being comes to life²⁰. Being is a speaking being, or *parlêtre*, in Lacan's own words.

Lacan coined this expression in order to show that, in psychoanalytic theory, the subject is a mixture of body and language, namely a body that unconsciously desires. Because of that it is caught up in a chain of signifiers that prevent him from acting purely instinctively; the *parlêtre* has *drives* not *instincts*. The distinction between drives and instincts is very important. It shows that the body is not taken in its purely biological sense. Thereby, it represents nothing else than the *Leib*.

For Richir, the *Leib* is a language phenomenon as much as it is a world phenomenon. I will not develop here the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* already made by Husserl. I think it is well known among phenomenologists. Its the same distinction also used by Merleau-Ponty when he speaks about the flesh (*chair*) that gives the fleshly essence, i.e. the *Wesen* sauvage, i.e. the rays of the world²¹.

“This is to say that the flesh is that by which the phenomenological field discovers its own consistency and autonomy: it is its tissue or element, that is, what we have called the phenomenality of the phenomenon. For the flesh is every time that which, while folding back on itself, so to speak, makes the phenomenon open onto other phenomena than itself [...]”²²

Richir considers this process to be much too ontologized by Merleau-Ponty. For him, the phenomenon of language is equally important in opening the world. In other words, the flesh is also a flesh of language. To put it another way, language constitutes the flesh of the world too. In his conception, Richir is much closer to the psychoanalytical theory than Merleau-Ponty. To be noted that, in both Richirian and Lacanian theory, language must be taken as transcendental, namely as condition of possibility for something to be instituted. Thus, transcendental interfacticity becomes a vehicle for *Wesen sauvages*, or significant that unknowingly affects the subject.

²⁰ Thus, it is a *living* Being, namely not without body, i.e. *Leib*

²¹ Cf. Renaud Barbaras, *Merleau-Ponty: Le réel et l'imaginaire*, p. 135

²² Marc Richir, *The Meaning of Phenomenology in the Visible and the Invisible*, p. 75

Back to Husserl. "Perceptive" *phantasia* and (non)-intentionality

Already in 1910, in the lecture named *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*²³, Husserl foreseen as a consequence of eidetic reduction the fact that the lived (*vécu*) [experience] will be "open to infinity because of the multitude of *non-actualized* intentional implications"²⁴. But, according to Richir there is an even deeper infinity (i.e. the wild infinity), one in which the intentional implications are not of symbolical nature.

"This wild infinity is that of language and the phenomenological unconscious, and any instituted (empirical) language is in a sense only the drawdown or projection on its plane, which is only apparent, and which exists only when a language takes itself for its 'object' by elaborating itself in its symbolic institution"²⁵.

In my opinion, Richir brings two important critiques in this quote:

1. the critique against the well-known Lacanian saying: "the unconscious is structured like a language";

2. the critique against what he considers a certain naiveté on Husserl's part regarding intentionality. If the world and its states are poles of intentional unity, then the attempt to suspend the natural attitude towards the world meets the difficulty of not knowing exactly how much of the representation is immanent (psychological) and how much of it is external, i.e. truly unknowable²⁶. As a consequence, Richir says, the intentionality is in risk of collapse to some kind of "absolute idealism of representation in which the psychological data would not recognise anything but themselves"²⁷.

To avoid this risk leading to tautology, Richir considers necessary for phenomenology to go beyond the standard of intentionality, as he puts it. And he finds means to do that right in Husserlian phenomenology. The concept of *phantasia*, which differs from the concept of imagination and is certainly not to be confused with *fantasy*, opens up to this possibility of breaking the intentionality barrier. Unfortunately, Husserl does not insist too much on that. If he had done so, he would have found that there are ruptures in the continuous flux of conscience,

²³ This title is later used by Heidegger for one of his books

²⁴ Marc Richir, *La psychologie comme phénoménologie transcendante : Husserl et au-delà de Husserl*, p. 378

²⁵ *Idem*

²⁶ Cf. Marc Richir, *Intentionnalité et intersubjectivité - Commentaire de Husserliana XV*, pp. 157-158

²⁷ Marc Richir, *op. cit.*, p. 158

something he was not prepared to accept, I speculate. Certainly, there are passive syntheses made without active participation on the subject's part. But this is done only to maintain a certain coherence in space and time.

Where Richir thinks the concept of *phantasia* should lead to is not simply the infinity, but the *wild* infinity where there is no space and no time. It represents the anarchic register of *Wesen sauvages*. Here, *sense is in the making (sens se faisant)*; not through synthesis but by a synesthetic process. Thus, *phantasia* should be a more basic register than imagination. In this register "images" are sketchy and represent only shadows or, as Richir puts it, the shadows of shadows. It is his way of saying that the objects are "perceived" in a non-intentional way.

When Richir is speaking about "perceptive" *phantasia* he is always using quotes. It is because perception is not really a perception, since its objects are non-intentional. In fact, the term was introduced by Husserl in 1918. It can be found in the text number 18 in Hua XXIII and designates

"[...] this particular type of phantasiai in which there is 'perception' (*Perzeption*) of something that is beyond (or below) the real (perceived in *Wahrnehmung*) and the fictive (intentional object of the imagination through the eventual mediation, in the case where there is figuration of the imagined object, of a "perceptive" appearance, of a *Bildobjekt* which is, in fact, a simulacrum)"²⁸.

Long before Richir, Husserl used the word *Perzeption* instead of *Wahrnehmung* to mark the difference between a perception in its own right and one that is not quite so. Because of the difficulty translation imposes, Richir uses inverted commas for the word perceptive. So, this particular type of perception called *Perzeption* by Husserl is involved in *phantasia*. It is outside the real or the fictive. The question is: where is it?

Given the fact that he doesn't take the theory of *phantasia* to its full development, Husserl would be pretty unclear in his answer. A clear answer can be found in Richir, instead: "perceptive" *phantasia* is present in the *Wesen sauvages* which are both language phenomena and world phenomena. They are part of sense-making, i.e. the sense-in-the-making (*sens se faisant*).

Let us return now to the first critique to be found in the quote above mentioned. It refers to Lacan's idea that the unconscious is structured like a language. This is a well-known assumption in Lacanian theory.

²⁸ Marc Richir, *Phénoménologie de l'élément poétique*, p. 1

I think the critique implied by Richir is in connection with the distinction he makes between the phenomenological unconscious and the symbolical unconscious. The distinction is already present in Merleau-Ponty, although he largely theorized only on phenomenological unconscious. Richir paid more attention to it and made it more evident. His conclusion is that the unconscious the psychoanalytical theory is talking about is linked exclusively to the symbolical, thus it is a symbolical unconscious, while the phenomenological unconscious belongs to a phenomenology of the *Wesen sauvages*.

Conclusion

What Richir criticizes about the idea of the unconscious being structured like a language is not so much the suggestion of the unconscious having a structure, but the fact that this structure is somehow rigid. It forms a *Gestell* that tautologically circles around a defined number of signifiers. Thus, it is not open to the infinite. In a sense, the same critique goes to Husserl also. Of course, the infinite Richir has in mind is the wild infinite, the one of the anarchic wild essences. It has more the meaning of *indefinite*.

Lacan is not totally foreign to the idea of *sense-making* as having in it the gap of the indefinite. In his theory, the element of the Real represents such a gap. As it is well known, according to Lacan there are three elements forming our psychic reality (the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary) tied together in a borromean knot. The real is defined as being that which cannot be comprehended, or better yet, the unthinkable. In the development of his theory we can find that the Real is considered to be not only inside the borromean knot but outside of it, also. Thus, Lacan will finally speak of the Real unconscious overcoming the limitation of a language that is taking itself as object. With the Real unconscious he attains the language as transcendental, thus, the Lacanian subject being no longer tied up to a particular language (maybe, the reason why his latest researches focus more on topology).

I will conclude by saying that the Real unconscious and the phenomenological unconscious are the two possible bridging points between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. If explored together, they can provide more insight into what it means for people to be social and speaking beings.

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