

RATIO NEGATIVA: NORMATIVE REASON AND HISTORY IN HUSSERL AND MERLEAU-PONTY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine the notion of normative reason in history with a special focus on the phenomenological approaches of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The setting of the present study is the relationship between Husserl's final presentation of phenomenology with ethico-normative questions about renewal, norms of reason, and absolute values. In this context, central to Husserl's phenomenological thinking is the idea of "person" as spontaneous and autonomous agency. As part of the argument, I contend that self-critical and methodological considerations within Husserl's phenomenological theory of reason point to the possibility of a philosophy of history. In the second part of the paper, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's recasting of the problematic of constitution. I show that this recasting makes explicit the problem of feasibility for the method of phenomenology to bring the ultimate transcendental origins of experience to evident demonstration. I contend that this self-critical consideration of method in phenomenology is displayed by Merleau-Ponty rereading of constitution as institution. There results a conception of rational normativity and of humanity in search of rational norms in history that integrates Husserl's rather Kantian regulative conception of reason.

KEYWORDS

Normativity, Reason, History, Phenomenological Method, Constitution, Institution

1. THE SETTING FOR THE STUDY

Husserl's last attempt at a comprehensive exposition of phenomenology in the *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* is both *motivated* and *introduced* in terms of a normative dilemma. This accent on normativity, however, underlies Husserl's whole phenomenological project. While assuming various shapes and shifting thematic focus according to the development and self-critical deepening of Husserl's own thought, the normative orientation of Husserl's meditations is centered

from the beginning around the idea of reason and the possibility to achieve a critique of reason beyond the confusions attaching to Kant's signature project. In this connection, the logico-epistemological concern of the *Logical Investigations* already discloses the proper field of phenomenological analysis as that of a scientifically rigorous critique of reason. Husserl reproaches Kant for having preferred the critical "saving" (*kritische "Rettung"*) of the positive sciences – and metaphysics – to the critique of knowledge and the clarification of knowledge down to its phenomenological sources. Kant's own critique limits itself to the determination of categorial forms rather than turning its thematic focus on the acts of consciousness that are essentially related to them:

Kant drops from the outset into the channel of a metaphysical epistemology in that he attempts a critical "saving" of mathematics, natural science and metaphysics, before he has subjected knowledge as such, the whole sphere of acts in which pre-logical objectivation [*das vorlogische Objektivieren*] and logical thought [*das logische Denken*] are performed, to a clarifying critique and analysis of essence, and before he has traced back the primitive logical concepts and laws to their phenomenological sources [*auf ihren phänomenologischen Ursprung*]. (Hua XIX, 732)

The phenomenological back-tracing of objective thought and objective sense, Husserl concludes, is "the only possible aim of a strictly scientific critique of reason."¹ In the years of gestation and deepening of the phenomenological problematic following the first documented breakthrough in the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl found occasion to put his new conception of phenomenology to work in connection with fundamental philosophical themes such as in the lectures on *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* from 1905 and those on *Thing and Space* from 1907.² In this context the expansion of intuition to the domain of categorial thought and the resulting recasting of the dichotomy between intuition and concept from the *Logical Investigations* are further developed in the explicit direction of a phenomenological-transcendental idealism. This development coincides with Husserl's lucid self-understanding of his own idea of phenomenology as radical critique of reason that, by implication, would overcome the dogmatic of reason of previous forms of transcendental philosophy.³ In a dramatic entry from 1906, Husserl came to identify the critique of reason with the very task upon which the authenticity of philosophical life depends: "I put in the first place the general task that I must solve for myself if I

¹See Husserl's *Zusatz* in Hua XIX, 733. Volumes in Husserliana are cited as *Hua* with Roman volume number and Arabic page reference.

²It is worth noting that the *Dingvorlesung* from the Summer semester of 1907 is part of a cycle of lectures entitled "Hauptstücke aus der Phänomenologie und *Kritik der Vernunft*" (my italics).

³This is also Heidegger's own take on Husserl's version of transcendental idealism. See Cristin 1999, 15.

shall be able to call myself a philosopher. I mean a *critique of reason* [*Kritik der Vernunft*]. A critique of logical and practical reason, of valuing reason in general. I cannot truly and truthfully live without getting clear in broad outline about sense, essence, methods, general aspects of a critic of reason.”⁴

Phenomenology issues from a project aimed at rethinking rationality as the proper and ultimate domain of philosophical investigation. In a capital manuscript composed thirty years after the presentation of his new idea of phenomenology as a critique of reason, Husserl gives an explicit albeit summative statement about the guiding idea of rationality as highest and most authentic kind of human function and orientation in and towards reality. By reference to the Kantian distinction between reason and understanding, Husserl presents the idea of authentic humanity as rational humanity:

[A]s I said, humankind understanding itself according to reason, understanding, namely, that it is rational humanity in wanting to be rational; [understanding] that this means an infinity of living and striving toward reason, that reason is precisely that which the human being as human, in his innermost being, is aiming for, that which alone can satisfy him, make him “blessed”; that reason allows for no differentiation into “theoretical,” “practical,” and “aesthetic”; that to be human is to be teleological and an ought-to-be [*Sein-Sollen*], and that this teleology holds sway in each and every activity and project of an ego.⁵

Husserl ties the fate of phenomenology to a meditation on the idea of reason as encompassing thinking, acting, and valuing as three axes of one single human reality understood as reason in the Kantian sense, i.e. ultimately as an “ought.”

The emphasis on the normative character of rationality animating the phenomenological project, however, assumes a particular and disquieting weight in the context of the phenomenological awakening of the problem of history – during and after World War One – and, more generally, in the context of the development and deepening of genetic analyses in phenomenology. The *genetic* investigations of the *Crisis* series aim at reconnecting the ideality of scientific propositions and ultimately the “ideality” of human rationality as such to the experiential dimension of the life-world as original dimension of evidential awareness. To put it in Husserl’s words, the *Crisis* is the project aiming at clarifying the enigma of the “deepest essential interrelation

⁴The reference manuscript for this text is X x 5. The passage is quoted by Walter Biemel in his *Einleitung des Herausgebers* in the second volume of the Husserliana series. Hua II, vii-viii. This is the volume that presents Husserl’s five lectures given in Göttingen in the Spring of 1907 entitled *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*.

⁵Hua VI, 275-276. The reference manuscript from which this passage is taken is B III 6 (1936). This manuscript is included in the Husserliana volume of the *Crisis* series as § 73. The manuscript is therefore published as part of the main text of the *Crisis*. However, as the editor notes in the critical appendix, the manuscript was not meant for publication. See *Zur Textgestaltung*, Hua VI, 519.

between reason [*Vernunft*] and being [*Seiendem*] as such.”⁶ In light of the *historical* problematic, however, what one ought to show is the very possibility and feasibility of carrying out this project through history. Paraphrasing Paul Ricoeur, the inspection of reason must become a retrospection of reason, or a “rational psychoanalysis” aiming at understanding reason as Idea that passes through generations and cultures historically.⁷ At this point, one also realizes that the project of rational critique, which coincides with the historical coming to self-awareness of humanity as rational, is exposed to the possibility of demise and failure. Humanity’s self-critical task, which Husserl identifies with the history and Idea of philosophy itself, can come to a halt and become void of meaning. Correspondingly, the critique of reason in the final texts belonging to the *Crisis* aims at presenting the project of rational critique genetically while exhibiting the historical possibility of this project as a renewal of reason in times of “crisis.”

The *history* of reason is therefore continuation of the *critique* of reason that starting from the present crisis both illuminates the original motivations of such crisis while making intelligible the present disorder and thus revealing a path forward: the historical critique of reason becomes therefore a “call” to reason as call for the present humanity to realize the conditions of a renewed human life in and for reason.⁸

These considerations lead us to the normative question raised at the beginning of the *Crisis*-text:

But can the world, and human existence in it, truthfully have a meaning [...] if history has nothing more to teach us than that all the shapes of the spiritual world, all the *obligations of life* [*Lebensbindungen*], ideals, norms upon which man relies, form and dissolve themselves like fleeting waves, that it always was and ever will be so, that again and again reason must turn into nonsense, and well-being into misery?⁹

The text placed at the end of the *Crisis*, which I quoted above, summarizes the answer Husserl is pursuing in this work: only by extending the rational project through historical periods and across cultural diversity it becomes possible to conceive of a virtually unlimited transcendence of reason with respect to all contingencies and relativities of history. In Husserlian terms, which raise considerable conceptual and methodological problems that cannot be worked out within the confines of this paper,

⁶Hua VI, 12.

⁷Cf. Ricoeur 1967, 163-164.

⁸For a paradigmatic illustration of Husserl’s style of historical interpretation and methodology, see the subsection to § 9 entitled “Characterization of the Method of Our Exposition” in Hua VI, 58-60.

⁹Hua VI, 4.

the ideal of rational transcendence as ultimately absolute is achieved in *intersubjectivity*.¹⁰

2. NOTION OF PERSON

The picture of Husserlian phenomenology that emerges from the deepened focus on an ethical-diagnostic critique of reason is complex. For the purposes of this paper, few sketchy remarks will have to suffice in order to delimit more clearly the setting of my study and of the considerations from Merleau-Ponty's work that I would like to offer.

The first point that needs to be clearly emphasized is that the question of normative reason in phenomenology is not posed on a level of abstract generality. When the idea of a norm of reason is presented in terms of a call or responsibility to and for reason, this issues from a concrete analysis of the notion of the "person." This connection is important here because Husserl explicitly conceives the "person" as "principle of *intelligibility*, thus, *rationality* [*Rationalität*]." ¹¹

In way of contextualization, Husserl lays out some essential traits of the concept of person and of a theory of the person in connection with the problem of intersubjectivity. It is worth noting that Husserl's focus on the problematic of the person intensifies in conjunction both with the genetic recasting of the problem of constitution and with the discovery of the problem of history in the Freiburg period starting in 1916, year which also is marked by the death of Husserl's youngest son, Wolfgang, killed at Verdun in the same year. Here I can only briefly touch on Husserl's manifold descriptions concerning the concept of the person but let me indicate three main themes that are especially relevant for the present discussion.

¹⁰Ricoeur summarizes the core problem posed by the conception of transcendence of reason in history to be realized on the basis of a conception of transcendental subjectivity as intersubjectivity when he asks "how are we to understand on the one hand that the historical man is constituted in an absolute consciousness and on the other hand that the sense that history develops includes the phenomenological man who effects [*opère*] this consciousness? A difficult dialectic seems to be presented here of the including and the included, between the transcendental ego and the sense which unifies history." Ricoeur 1967, 148. See also *ibid.* 172-174. Ronald Bruzina raises a similar issue in connection with the problem of language in Husserl: "[T]here is a definite *engagement from beyond* the ego-center itself that is essential to language and to the determination of its meaning if it is to have at all the role Husserl ascribes to it in the community of selves within which transcendental subjectivity is to find itself: and this stands in conflict with the full freedom Husserl at the same time wishes to reserve for the intentional ego-center of phenomenological reflection." Bruzina 1981, 363.

¹¹Hua XIV, 17 (1920 or 1921). See Bernet/Kern/Marbach 1989, 196.

2.a. Causality, Conditionality, Motivation

Already in the “pre-genetic” second volume of the *Ideas*, Husserl had laid bare a number of essential features pertaining to the “person.” In this set of texts, Husserl distinguishes between various senses of “causality” in order to describe the coming about in experience (“constitution”) of the principal domains of reality, that is, physico-material nature, animated or psycho-physical nature, and the personal or spiritual world. These senses are: 1) *causality (Kausalität)* proper, as we understand it in the context of physical nature of modern natural science. Modern physical nature is reality as “causal nexus by means of a limited number of univocally determined elements” and as “spatial mutual externality” of spatial bodies.¹² The absoluteness of physical nature and, more specifically, of “spatial bodies” (*Raumkörper*), however, is shown to be both essentially linked and therefore relative to the sensing dynamics of a living body.¹³

2) *Conditionality (Konditionalität)* is the term used to describe the kind of dynamic relationship that psycho-physical entities, such as animals and humans, entertain with external/physical events as well as internal/psychic circumstances.

On the one hand, the animal or human living being relates to external nature in a way that is to be clearly distinguished from the way in which material things relate among themselves.¹⁴ The living bodily subject is a *psycho-aesthesiological* unity, that is, a unity of sensings (*Empfindnisse*).¹⁵ The sensings of the living body have the characteristic of being localized. The localization of sensings in the Body, however, is a “*spreading out [Ausbreitung] [...] that differs essentially from extension [Ausdehnung] in the sense of all determinations that characterize the res extensa.*”¹⁶ Thus, as Husserl remarks, a sensing (*Empfindnis*), for instance the sensations in my fingertips corresponding to the smooth surface of this piece of paper, cannot be understood as a real quality of my body in the same sense as I say that this piece of paper is smooth. Unlike the properties of material things, sensings are not given externally in different perspectives, but are found within the flow of lived experiences, they are mine as a psychophysical, or better, psycho-aesthesiological unity. For this reason, as Husserl concludes, “[a]ll sensings pertain to my soul; everything extended to the material thing.”¹⁷

¹²See Hua IX, 7-8.

¹³“In original experience, perception, ‘body’ [*Körper*] is unthinkable without sensuous qualification [*sinnliche Qualifiziertheit*].” Hua IV, 37ff. See also Hua IV, § 18.

¹⁴Hua IV, 155-156.

¹⁵Hua IV, 146.

¹⁶Hua IV, 149

¹⁷Hua IV, 150

On the other hand, the stream of psychic life is characterized by the coming about of unities (such as the experience of single perceptions, memories, phantasies, or feelings, etc.) that differ from the unities experienced in the sheer physical world of material things (such as their extension or color). As Husserl already pointed out in the course on *Phenomenological Psychology*, the unity of soul and its states cannot be understood in terms of the transcendent unity of a material thing and its properties. The unity of soul is given *in* its internal temporal flow.¹⁸ Due to the flowing character of psychic life and its states, psychic properties “cannot remain unchanged,”¹⁹ while thingly properties can in principle remain the same. The persistence of psychic states does not manifest unchanged properties, but rather it gives rise to what Husserl designates as “dispositions,” as persisting features of psychic life.

Without going any further into the intricacies involved in this interpretation of the sensing body, the prime point here is that a broader sense of causality emerges from these analyses when subjectivity, by way of the eminent phenomenon of the living body, is integrated in the account of the reality that we meet with in experience.²⁰

3) Finally, Husserl attributes to the entities that we identify as “persons” the aspect of *motivation (Motivation)*. This aspect refers to circumstances of the “surrounding world” (*Umwelt*) in which neither causal nor conditional dependencies are in play. Within the surrounding world, Husserl writes, “in my theoretical, emotional, and practical behavior – in my theoretical experience and thinking, in my position-taking as to pleasure, enjoyment, hoping, wishing, desiring, wanting – *I feel myself conditioned by the matter in question*, though this obviously does not mean psychophysically conditioned.”²¹ Or, as he also remarks, “I do not *therein* apprehend myself as dependent on my Body or on my history.”²² Here, the person, which remains a psychophysical reality, reveals at the same time a form of autonomy with respect to material

¹⁸“The flux of psychic life has its unity *in* itself.” Hua IV, 132; my italics.

¹⁹Hua IV, 132f.

²⁰“Besides the relations of the real to the real, which belong to the essence of everything real as spatial, temporal, and causal relations, there also belong to this essence relations of psychophysical conditionality [*psychophysische Konditionalität*] in possible experience. Things are ‘experienced,’ are ‘intuitively given’ to the subject, necessarily as unities of a spatio-temporal-causal nexus, and necessarily pertaining to this nexus is a pre-eminent thing, ‘my Body,’ as the place where, and always by essential necessity, a system of subjective conditionality is interwoven with this system of causality [...] Something thingly is experienced (perceptually apperceived, to give privilege to the originary experience) in such a way that, through a mere shift of focus, there emerge relations of dependency of the apperceived state of the thing on the sphere of sensation and on the rest of the subjective sphere. Here we have the *primordial state of psychophysical conditionality* (under this heading are included *all conditional* relations which run back and forth between thingly and subjective being).” Hua IV, 64-65.

²¹Hua IV, 140.

²²Hua IV, 141.

nature and earlier dispositional and psychic data of one's own experience. Moreover, in the surrounding world objects are experienced that play a constitutive role for personal experience such as various historical and social institutions, communities, and customs. The person behaves both passively and actively towards these objects, but never in terms of causal dependence: the person passively takes up the typicality of normative demands coming from these objects while also always actively assenting or refusing her assent to their norms.²³ From these observations there emerges a broader meaning of personality as "spirit," which points to a dimension of personal community and intersubjective history. In any case, this dimension of personality and spirituality remains for Husserl to be characterized by the notion of motivation: "Mentality [*Geistigkeit*] includes, purely in itself, a species of causality, the causality of motivation."²⁴

2.b. Conviction

In the lecture course on *Phenomenological Psychology*, the person as subject of motivations is defined as "a subject of self-instituted convictions."²⁵ By way of this "self-relatedness" (*Selbstbezogenheit*), the person is the "I" "in the proper sense."²⁶ The human person is the unity that can relate to the whole of her life, that is, in contrast to the animal, not just in relation to her present but also as past and future personal life as total motivating field for stances, valuations, and volitions:

[The] human person does not live within the bare present; it lives within its whole life; its whole life, its personal Being, as personal Being that has been and, again, as future personal Being; the whole of past personality within the whole of personal temporality, within the whole of the personal, streaming duration of life, is thematic for the person, is a motivational field [*Motivationsfeld*], a field of specifically human attitudes, valuations and volitions.²⁷

The picture that emerges from these summative references only confirms a structural element that features in Husserl's philosophy as foundational for everything else. I am referring to the element of *intentionality* of consciousness. Personal subjectivity in the way Husserl describes it points to a surplus with respect to any causal or conditional moments. But this surplus is precisely the aspect of *meaning* in the life of consciousness as agency taking up and correlating to meaning. Consciousness

²³Cf. Hua IV, 141.

²⁴Hua IX, 10.

²⁵Hua IX, 162, 214-215.

²⁶Hua IX, 164.

²⁷Ms. A V 5, 12a/b. The passage from this manuscript is quoted in Bernet/Kern/Marbach 1989, 197-198.

“actualizes” meaning *as* meaning in the first place, since meaning is always meaning *to* or meaning *for*.²⁸ As a result, and in connection with the theme of normative reason, this also means that the possibility to raise reason to a norm of life only makes sense in relationship to a living consciousness. The idea of motivation or “field of motivations” expresses this fact that whatever makes up my surrounding world is never simply related to me in terms of causal or conditional dependencies but also and especially in terms of intentional spontaneity. This aspect, in turn, is the basis for conceiving a form of autonomy in the nature of the person, which then emerges as the active agency correlative to the actuality of rational norms: that is, as agency that renews, retrieves, reactivates the binding sense of norms.

2.c. Absolute Ought

One more element needs to be added to this descriptive-demonstrative analysis of the “person” as representing the evidential presupposition for the kind of answer Husserl offers to the normative dilemma launching the *Crisis*. In a remarkable text from July 1933, Husserl indicates the essential point about the idea of person and the way it connects to a phenomenological theory of reason:

To life belongs normalcy not only as type of the pre-given environing world, into whose typical structure one grows up, whose types one takes up, but also active norm-setting and, out of oneself and in union with those who are like-minded, fashioning of the environing world into one in accord with norms. The distinction is made between the normal in accord with a *kathekon* and the normal in accord with that which is willed or is to be willed unconditionally, the absolute Ought [*das absolut Gesollte*]. So to human beings belongs absolute critique, but also critique of the Absolute in regard to its absoluteness and the possible relativity that may still cling to it.²⁹

If you are a person, you find yourself and grow in certain pre-given established patterns of life, in a certain context of “typicality of motivations” that are transient but that are persistent as well. These patterns and this typicality of value-structures (Husserl mentions here “interests,” “actions,” “plans in life,” “political projects”) are “taken up” and then they constitute a “normalcy” of life. Yet if you are a person, this typicality and normalcy always has relative value, the pre-given “motivations” to pursue a certain goal, to believe in a life-project, or to act in a certain way are never ultimately necessitating or constricting. Thus, one should note first of all that the whole point of what Husserl calls here “active norm-setting” fits into the more general argument about the *natural attitude* and for the necessity of the *phenomenological epoche*. Husserl dramatically

²⁸This point is forcefully made by Bruzina. See Bruzina 1981, 358.

²⁹Hua Dok II/1, 202.

expresses this idea by saying that to human beings there belongs “absolute critique” as a “critique of the Absolute in regard to its absoluteness and the possible relativity that may still cling to it.” This, in turn, is the intuitive-evidential ground allowing Husserl to make the further distinction between what he calls the *kathekon*, and the “absolute Ought” (*das absolut Gesollte*). The term *kathekon* refers to the Stoic idea of “duty,” understood as conformity of action to the necessary and rational order of nature. The idea of absolute Ought features prominently in connection with Husserl’s phenomenological thinking about the human person as given in the modality of an “ought.” I do not dwell here on the manifold implications of this distinction for the self-understanding of methods, scope, and goals of Husserlian phenomenology. This is a matter that Husserl himself did not fully elaborate into one comprehensive account but rather explored in a series of suggestive investigations.³⁰ Just let it suffice to say that this distinction has enormous weight in Husserl’s ethico-diagnostic critique of reason: the constitution of the ethical human person according to absolute values guiding her realization as genuine person becomes paradigmatic for Husserl’s reflections on the normative idea of reason with ethical resonance in the *Crisis*-texts:

Human personal life proceeds in stages of self-reflection and self-responsibility from isolated occasional acts of this form to the stage of universal self-reflection and self-responsibility, up to the point of seizing in consciousness the idea of autonomy, the idea of a resolve of the will to shape one’s whole personal life into the synthetic unity of a life of universal self-responsibility and, correlatively, to shape oneself into the true “I,” the free, autonomous “I” which seeks to realize his innate reason, the striving to be true to himself, to be able to remain identical with himself as a reasonable “I”...³¹

If the task of phenomenology is ultimately that of reestablishing *reason* in European philosophy and in the European spirit, this aspiration must proceed through a radical act of self-explication and self-knowledge in which all the natural aspects of our world-experience are neutralized, correlatively radical reflective activity set free, and a critique of reason reawakened, re-effectuated, and projected into its final shape. Husserl identifies the “*Endgestalt*” of the process of critical self-consideration of reason with “transcendental subjectivity” both at the beginning of the *Cartesian Meditations* and in the *Crisis*.³² Both texts can be read as a long argument establishing that the idea of the

³⁰The experience of “absolute Ought” is subject of extensive meditations in the set of manuscripts collected in the edited Husserliana volume entitled *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Husserliana XLII). For a more focused treatment and interpretation of the notion of “absolute Ought” in Husserl, see Anthony Steinbock’s chapter on “Vocational Experience and the Modality of the Absolute Ought” in his 2017 book with the title *Limit-Phenomena and Phenomenology in Husserl*.

³¹Hua VI, 272-273.

³²“[T]o say that] philosophy, science in all its forms, is rational – that is a tautology. But in all its forms it is on its way to a higher rationality; it is rationality which, discovering again and again its unsatisfying

human being as rational being can only be ratified by transcendental subjectivism and its central thesis that subjectivity or consciousness is ultimately, and radically, intentional spontaneity: this argument becomes at the same time, and forcefully in the *Crisis*, a “call” to and for a human life in reason as a life that is not something relative to be eventually overcome, like a finite task, but rather a task to be realized as an infinite Idea in an infinite process of approximation and increasing perfection.³³

At this point, however, there is a structural element pertaining to genetic phenomenology that is pivotal for the considerations I would like to offer in the rest of the paper. The problematic I will address pivots around the following core insight of Husserlian phenomenology: the realization of the “final shape” of transcendental subjectivism coincides in the phenomenological mode of this realization with a radical investigation into ultimate, that is, constitutive “origins.”

3. A QUESTION OF METHOD

At this point, I would like to point out a methodological aspect pertaining to the investigation into constitutive origins, especially as constitution in Husserl’s phenomenology comes down to the process of temporalization – as the central process constitutive of all experience and of consciousness as such.³⁴ The problematic of temporality plays a determining role therefore for the understanding of a phenomenology of normative and *absolute* reason in two main respects. First, because this picture brings to bear considerations about temporality and eternity. Husserl’s considerations about the process of infinite actualization of reason in history point to an idea of philosophy as temporal activity shaped by eternity or as “temporal self-actualization of an eternal and infinite identity of sense.”³⁵ Second, because questions about rationality of life and of our experience of the world can ultimately be answered

relativity, is driven on in its toils, in its will to attain the true and full rationality. But finally it discovers that this rationality is an idea residing in the infinite and is *de facto* necessarily [only] on the way; but [it discovers] also that there is a final form [*Endgestalt*] here which is at the same time the beginning form of a new sort of infinity and relativity...”

Hua VI, 274; cf. Hua I, 46

³³For the contrast of what holds good as absolute Ought and finite tasks, see Hua XLII, 395 and Steinbock 2017, 133. For the absolute Ought as infinite Idea, see Hua VI 273-274.

³⁴This is a point that Eugen Fink places at the center of his collaborative work with Husserl as central for the systematic presentation of phenomenology Husserl was pursuing in the last years. On this point, see e.g. Bruzina 2001, 50.

³⁵Ricoeur 1967, 158.

on the ground of a phenomenology of temporality as true, genuine *absolute* constitutive origin of experience.³⁶

In contrast to the idea of “speculative analysis,” Husserl maintained until the end the idea that every rational claim in philosophy must be ultimately grounded in an act of intuitional evidencing and demonstration, as it is paradigmatically and programmatically stated in paragraph 24 of *Ideas I* about the “Principle of All Principles.”³⁷ In the *Crisis*, in keeping with this principle, Husserl identifies the task of phenomenology with “the task of interrogating, concretely and analytically, actual subjectivity, i.e., subjectivity as having the actual phenomenal world in intuitive validity – which, properly understood, is nothing other than carrying out the phenomenological reduction and putting transcendental phenomenology into action.”³⁸

Husserl’s grammatical commitment to the concrete work of description and demonstrative exhibiting in intuition – aimed in the end at establishing conditions of possibility for normative rationality – encounters however a methodological problem of principle, especially when confronted with the task of clarifying the problem of temporal formation itself by way of the analysis of the “living present.” In his work on Husserl’s last set of manuscripts on the problematic of temporality, Klaus Held clearly summarizes the issue I am referring to in few words:

For phenomenology it makes only sense to speak of objects in the “how” of their givenness. There results the following situation: according to its own setting of the question, the radicalized reflection upon the mode of being of the functioning “I” refers to givennesses by which this reflection itself is conditioned, which therefore lie “before” its own activity. *What* these givennesses however *are*, can only result from the “how” of their being reflected upon.³⁹

³⁶This is of course Husserl’s famous injunction in § 81 of *Ideas I*: “Das transzendente ‘Absolute,’ das wir uns durch die Reduktionen herauspräpariert haben, ist in Wahrheit nicht das Letzte, es ist etwas, das sich selbst in einem gewissen tiefliegenden und völlig eigenartigen Sinn konstituiert und seine Urquelle in einem letzten und wahrhaft Absoluten hat. / Zum Glück können wir die Rätsel des Zeitbewusstseins in unseren vorbereitenden Analysen außer Spiel lassen, ohne ihre Strenge zu gefährden.” Hua III/1, 182.

³⁷“That every originally given intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originally offered to us in intuition (so to speak, in its actuality ‘in person’) is to be accepted simply as it presents itself, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there.” Hua III/1, 51.

³⁸Hua VI, 272.

³⁹“Nun hat es für die Phänomenologie nur Sinn, über Gegenstände im Wie ihres Gegebenseins zu sprechen. So entsteht folgende Lage: die radikalisierte Reflexion auf die Seinsweise des fungierenden Ich verweist gemäß dem Sinn ihrer eigenen Fragestellung auf Gegebenheiten, durch die sie selbst genetisch bedingt ist, die also ‘vor’ ihrer eigenen Aktivität liegen. *Was* jedoch diese Gegebenheiten *sind*, kann sich nur aus dem Wie ihrer Reflektiertheit ergeben.” Held 1966, 96.

Put in other words, this is the issue of how the phenomenological work of evidencing demonstration can bear upon and *access* intuitively the constitutive sources from which the material of intuition, that is, phenomena, are constituted in the first place.⁴⁰

This is an immensely important matter upon which the sense itself of phenomenology as philosophical enterprise depends and which, of course, goes far beyond the confines of the present paper.⁴¹ The most that can be done here is to state that the issue that a reductive-phenomenological methodology must face when confronted with the bottommost question of proto-temporal constitution is an issue of principle for all of phenomenology and point out the way in which the same issue plays a role in Merleau-Ponty's own understanding of phenomenology in general and of a theory of reason in history in particular.

4. FROM THE TRANSCENDENTAL "EGO" TO THE TRANSCENDENTAL "FIELD": MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGY

The question at the center of my considerations could be stated like this: what would a theory of normative reason and, more generally, of reason in history look like in light of and as a result of self-critical considerations of method that radically recast the problematic of constitution in phenomenology?

This is where Merleau-Ponty's contribution enters the present discussion. At this point, I would like to connect the previous considerations of the kinds of issues that are raised in phenomenology by the deepening of analysis into the sphere of origins with programmatic statements in Merleau-Ponty's work that are guided by the implications of a radically recast theory of constitution. Let me in somewhat compressed form outline the entire matter with reference to two programmatic documents from the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and in the form of two principal theses.

⁴⁰Ronald Bruzina has repeatedly captured this idea in his work on Husserl's phenomenology, especially in connection with Fink's contribution to the latter. Cf. for instance the following explicative formulation that neatly captures the issue that is here at stake: "However, the *method* for the disclosure that aims to explicate the fundamental condition that grounds all further modalities of experiential engagement in the world has to be the kind that is *appropriate to* the status of that fundamental condition. In that this fundamental condition is that out of which phenomenality as such arises, it is not the kind of thing that can itself lie open phenomenally in an intuitive moment of evidencing. A method is required, therefore, that brings this fundamental condition to consideration without pretending to be simple, straightforward *presentation*." Bruzina 2002, 181.

⁴¹Of course, the issue is the centerpiece of Fink's critical-collaborative work with Husserl in the last years. See the whole *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*. On the whole issue and its implications for Husserlian phenomenology, see the 2004 indispensable contribution of Ronald Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology, 1928-1938*.

In the critically important fourth section of the “Introduction” to the *Phenomenology of Perception* with the title “The Phenomenal Field,” Merleau-Ponty gives us the essential point of a critically recast phenomenological theory of constitution within the program of transcendental phenomenology:

Unless it becomes conscious of itself at the same time as becoming conscious of its results, reflection can never be full and it can never be a total clarification of its object. We must not merely settle into a reflective attitude or into an unassailable *Cogito*, but also reflect upon this reflection, understand the natural situation it is aware of replacing and that thereby belongs to its definition. We must not merely practice philosophy, but also become aware of the transformation that it brings with it in the spectacle of the world and in our existence. Only on this condition can philosophical knowledge become an absolute knowledge and cease to be a specialty of a technique. Thus, an absolute Unity will no longer be asserted, which is even less doubtful now that it does not need to be realized in Being. *The center of philosophy is no longer an autonomous transcendental subjectivity, situated everywhere and nowhere, but is rather found in the perpetual beginning of reflection at that point when an individual life begins to reflect upon itself.* Reflection is only truly reflection if it does not carry itself outside of itself, if it knows itself as *reflection-upon-an-unreflected*, and consequently as a change in the structure of our existence.⁴²

Along with the natural and social world, we have discovered that which is truly transcendental, which is not the collection of constitutive operations through which a transparent world, without shadows and without opacity, is spread out in front of an impartial spectator, but rather the ambiguous life where the *Ursprung* of transcendences takes place, which through a fundamental contradiction, puts me into communication with them and on this basis makes knowledge possible.⁴³

While I cannot linger on the dramatically transformative insight at work in these passages, the prime point here is Merleau-Ponty’s consummate realization that the self-meditation of the reflecting phenomenologist into the “disinterested transcendental on-looker” remains conditioned in its very task *by* and is fundamentally dependent *on* the “natural situation” of “irreflective life.” In other words, reflection, specifically as transcendental reflection into ultimate “origins,” discovers itself as always *posthumous* with respect to the set of structures and operations enabling its very reflective action. Merleau-Ponty forcefully rephrases this point in the “Preface,” when he writes that *because* “our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux on which we are trying to

⁴²PhP 75. My italics.

⁴³PhP 418-419.

seize,” *then* this primordially irreflective situation must remain reflection’s “initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all.”⁴⁴

This radicalization of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction firmly grounds the theory of constitution in the phenomenal field originally open to the meditating and reflecting subject. As a result, the “center of philosophy,” and not just of phenomenology, is no longer a primordial *ego* constituting the totality of the phenomenal world, but rather a “transcendental *field*” or the very originating of reflection emerging *in relation to* the phenomenal field as primordial: “This word [i.e., the transcendental field] signifies that reflection never has the entire world and the plurality of monads spread out and objectified before its gaze, that it only ever has a partial view and a limited power.”⁴⁵

Now it is an extremely difficult matter to work out the details of this “finitizing” of transcendental subjectivity (especially as this step in transcendental phenomenology draws from and is analogous to Fink’s whole attempt in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*).⁴⁶ The important thing for our purposes is to recognize that in the program of Merleau-Ponty’s explication of accessibility for the truths of transcendental reflection on the part of the meditating-phenomenologizing *ego* the central medium of that accessibility is the phenomenal field itself transcending this *ego* while in this way also making the *ego*’s knowledge of phenomena – and transcendental reflection – possible.

5. A PRIME ISSUE OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY: THE TRANSCENDENTAL ORIGINATION OF HUMAN NORMATIVE REASON IN THE WORLD

What I briefly sketched out as Merleau-Ponty’s rethinking of the problematic of constitution entails profound consequences for a conception of normative reason. This new conception of constitution both guides and is put to work, probed, and further determined everywhere in Merleau-Ponty’s *corpus*. There are various lines of argument that one could follow but I shall focus on a salient moment as most relevant for the kind of issue that we are discussing.

In 1949, in the context of his course on *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, Merleau-Ponty introduces the idea that Saussurian linguistics sketches out

⁴⁴PhP vii-ix. We find the same realization being forcefully articulated in the opening chapter of *Le visible et l’invisible* on “Réflexion et interrogation,” especially in the section entitled “La foi perceptive et la réflexion.” VI 47-74. Cf. on this point Kerckhoven 2003, 82-83 and Bruzina 2002, 178-179.

⁴⁵PhP 74.

⁴⁶On the point in brackets, see Bruzina 2002, 180.

the basic conceptual framework for a new philosophy of history, claim that he again repeats in his inaugural lecture at the College de France in 1953.⁴⁷

Now, for Merleau-Ponty, the merit of Saussure's linguistics consists in having rehabilitated the point of view of the speaking subject who uses language in order to accomplish an act of communication of meaning; from here, Merleau-Ponty interprets Saussure's conceptual pair *langue* / *parole* as entailing the idea of a system or totality of language that however is not governed by a principle of reason, and that rather remains exposed to the contingency of the act of speech in the situation of communication:

It is necessary that language is, *around* each speaking subject, like an instrument that has its own inertia, its exigencies, its constraints, its internal logic, and that nonetheless it remains always open to their initiatives [...] always capable of shifts of sense, of equivocations, of functional substitutions, which bestows upon this logic something of a stumbling gait.⁴⁸

Put another way, the speaking person makes manifest her intention to speak in the act of speech, thereby positing, assenting, and asserting something in spontaneous action while all the same addressing a linguistic community from which she also adopts an already established system of communal meanings that therefore makes her spontaneous action also already no longer totally free, autonomous, and individual -, which is especially telling if the insight to be communicated is a token of knowledge gained in transcendental reflection. The already established communal meanings, however, do not remain unaffected by the singularity of the act of speech, which, in turn, has the potential to ensue into a new usage of the already existing linguistic structures leading up to a re-systematization of the whole of language.

This conception clearly implies a certain understanding of history. In a text from 1952 entitled *Le langage indirect et les voix du silence*, Merleau-Ponty draws an explicit parallel between phenomena of expression, this time both linguistic (literature) and non-linguistic (painting), and the dynamics of the historical event and historicity. It is in this context that Merleau-Ponty articulates in outline a theory of reason in history by drawing and originally expanding the Husserlian notion of *Stiftung*. In Husserl, this

⁴⁷Saussure does not appear in the bibliography of *The Structure of Behavior* nor in that of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. The first substantive mentions of Saussure can be found in *La métaphysique dans l'homme* from 1947, in the course on "Language and Communication" from 1948, and in the course on "La conscience et l'acquisition du langage" from 1949. Cf. Merleau-Ponty's statement in the *Prose du monde* summarizing this point: "Saussure a l'immense mérite d'accomplir la démarche qui libère l'histoire de l'historicisme et rend possible une nouvelle conception de la raison." PM 34.

⁴⁸"Il faut que la langue soit, *autour* de chaque sujet parlant, comme un instrument que a son inertie propre, ses exigences, ses contraintes, sa logique interne, et néanmoins qu'elle reste toujours ouverte à leurs initiatives [...] toujours capable des glissements de sens, des équivoques, des substitutions fonctionnelles qui donnent à cette logique comme une allure titubante." SNS 153.

term, which Merleau-Ponty translates as “institution,” is meant to describe the formation of sense, especially of the ideal sense of scientific productions, in the context of the problem of historical constitution of objectivity. In a passage from this 1952 essay Merleau-Ponty encapsulates his understanding of the notion of *Stiftung*:

Husserl has used the fine word *Stiftung* – foundation or establishment – to designate first of all the unlimited fecundity of each present which, precisely because it is singular and passes, can never stop having been and thus being universally; but above all to designate that fecundity of the products of a culture which continue to have value after they perpetually come to life again. It is thus that the world as soon as he has seen it, his first attempts at painting, and the whole past of painting all deliver up to a *tradition* to the painter – *that is*, Husserl remarks, *the power to forget origins* and to give to the past not a survival, which is the hypocritical form of forgetfulness, but a new life, which is the noble form of memory.⁴⁹

There would be a lot to unpack here but allow me to point out only the salient point in a summative way and then move to my conclusive remarks. The notion of *Stiftung* / “institution,” as Merleau-Ponty begins to read it in this text, exhibits features analogous to the open systematic of language while also becoming paradigmatic for framing the formation of sense, meaning, coherence, and ultimately reason in human history. On the one hand, there is an aspect of singularity or contingency of the instituting act or event, which, at the same time opens a field or norm of sense or of a tradition characterized by a certain normativity. On the other hand, there is the aspect of sense or normativity in which the instituting event both inserts itself and which the same event also modifies, transforms by re-launching or re-effectuating the elements provided by the acquired, already established, and initially guiding sense or norm into a new norm.⁵⁰

The expansion to the domains of intersubjectivity, culture, and history is clearly carried out in the lecture course entirely dedicated to the theme of “institution”: “Thus, visible institution is nothing but the support of a spirit of institution, [which is] however certainly not immutable [...] but whose change is itself reaction of the event upon the instituted. The instituted is necessary for there to be open register, history.”⁵¹ The principal feature that the notion of “institution” is ultimately meant to capture and summarize is therefore that of the openness of sense, which Merleau-Ponty also describes as “rationality” or “logic in contingency.”⁵²

⁴⁹S 73-74.

⁵⁰On this point and especially regarding Merleau-Ponty’s theory of history, see the clear and insightful exposition by Roberto Terzi, *Institution, événement et histoire chez Merleau-Ponty* (2017).

⁵¹IP 40.

⁵²E 88, RC 46. Merleau-Ponty also speaks of a “lived logic” in E 88.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty makes explicit another consequence of this reading of institution in his commentaries on Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*. Husserl's theory of institution in a text such as the *Origin of Geometry*, according to Merleau-Ponty, implies that "the transcendental origin cannot be anything but an empirical origin: there is in the empirical origin an interior, a conceivable history to be made explicit, and that is there in the form of a field."⁵³ Starting from considerations such as these, Merleau-Ponty will recast Husserl's analysis of "institution" beyond the initial and more restrictive formulations of intentional analysis:

There is sense, and particularly fruitful sense, sense capable of founding always and founding always new acquisitions, only through sedimentation, trace [here push Husserl: *Stiftung* is not enveloping thought, but open thought, not the intended and *Vorhabe* of an actual center, but intended "off-center" which will be rectified, not the positing of an end, but the positing of a style, not a frontal grasp but a lateral divergence, algae brought back from the depths.]⁵⁴

If institution is defined as "lateral divergence," then no instituting act or event can aim and eventually embrace the "core" of reason, as grasping or evidencing a total, complete truth or "essence," but rather must remain the opening of a yet-undefined field of meaning which will require rectification, re-establishment, re-effectuation. This also implies a radicalization of the Husserlian moments of "sedimentation" of a tradition and of "forgetting" of origins inaugurating a field of sense: the "totality of *Urstiftung*" can never be fully retrieved and seized upon in "absolute coincidence."⁵⁵ As a result, history, understood in light of a radicalized logic of institution, can become again, Merleau-Ponty writes, "that which it ought to be for the philosopher: the center of his reflection [...] as the place of our interrogations and stupefactions."⁵⁶

8. INTERPRETIVE PROPOSAL

In way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that a phenomenological notion of normative reason as we find it articulated both in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty can enrich our understanding of the *obligating* nature of normativity while complying with the double-sense inherent to the binding meaning of "obligation." This word stems from the Latin *ob-ligare* as expressing both an aspect of constraint, limitation, and an

⁵³IP 100.

⁵⁴HLP 30.

⁵⁵"Is there coincidence with the totality of the *Urstiftung*, if the tradition is always forgotten? We shall see it to raise the question. Wouldn't coincidence be the death of the *logos* since forgetfulness makes tradition fruitful?" HLP 35.

⁵⁶S 88.

aspect of connection and mediation. The apparent contradiction of these two meanings is inherent in the concept of “limit” as *limes*, as an extremity, or *Schranke*, while being all the same an element of continuity, a point of passage in the other than itself, in spite of displaying an interruption, a discontinuity.⁵⁷

1) The normativity of reason appears in Husserl as an “Idea.” This is indication of a squarely Kantian position: the idea of a norm of “reason” is essentially the idea of a “limit” of reason or of reason as “limit.” The normative conception of reason that results from this is the conception of reason as normative form that is not and cannot be fully realized in the present. Reason is rather an “absolute Ought” that is never to be completely resolved by the accomplishment of a finite task. As in Kant, also in Husserl reason as “Idea” has only a regulative sense which is purely formal and deprived of any constitutive content. Reason is an ideal task to be realized infinitely, it is a permanent “obligation” ordering and commanding the movement and progress of human cognition. For Kant, the Ideas of reason must remain “postulates”: the point here is that while the intellect can only operate cognitively within the limits conditioned by experience, reason demands the continuous overcoming of conditioned knowledge towards the summation of all experiential conditions in an unconditional totality. Yet, and for this reason, the very movement along the series of conditions of what is empirically given seems to find its essential *raison d’être* in the task to bring the Idea of reason to full display and completion. In other words, without the movement towards the unconditional Ideas of reason there would be not only no reason but, as a result, intellectual cognition itself would come to a halt. Without reason imposing an infinite task to the intellect, reason would simply be realized in some finite intellectual accomplishment and, therefore, become dogmatic. Thus, if knowledge is unable to step beyond the confines of the empirically given to realize the unconditional totality promised by reason, at the same time it can never simply stop at any particular point of its empirically conditioned insights as if they were final determinations of the unconditional totality. Thus framed on the model of the criticist concepts of reason

⁵⁷I base these and the following remarks around the concept of “limit” on Gaetano Chiurazzi’s considerations about “La razionalità del reale” (“The Rationality of the Real”). This is the title of the conclusive section of Chiurazzi’s 2017 book entitled *Dynamis. Ontologia dell’incommensurabile*. Chiurazzi writes: “Per quanto apparentemente contraddittori, i concetti di limite e di mediazione non sono infatti opposti: il limite (*Grenze, limen*) può infatti essere inteso come un estremo, un confine (*Schranke, limes*), oppure come un elemento di continuità, che *appare* come un’interruzione e che, a un altro livello di considerazione, è invece un punto di passaggio.” Chiurazzi 2017, 253.

and intellect, Husserl's normative conception of reason in history is equivalent to a philosophy of "dynamic" or "iterative" reason.⁵⁸

2) According to Husserl, this iterative process has its "final shape" (*Endgestalt*) in the idea of transcendental subjectivity as ideal placeholder for the perfect harmonization of absolute values into one single system of reason. In spite of the difficulties, tensions, and fruitful ambiguities raised by Husserl's late meditations on history, the Idea of reason is forcefully asserted in terms of a comprehensive totality giving unity to the whole of history. But it is at this point that two interrelated difficulties arise with respect to the very historicity of reason: first, the Idea of reason – as transcendental subjectivity – is simply taken to ultimately deliver the final insights about constitution resulting from the radical inquiry into temporal-constitutive origins of experience; second, and essentially connected with this first point, history could be thought as simply functional for and ultimately external to the actualization of rational sense in the intentional experiencing and knowing of a personal subject. "*Ratio*" is a title for an *index* that is recognized as a stable unity of sense and that Husserl tends to interpret on the model of the Idea of science – even if in the corresponding expansion and radicalization that this Idea undergoes in Husserl's philosophy.⁵⁹ In Merleau-Ponty, the integration of self-critical and methodological considerations into a radically transformed transcendental phenomenology rather point to a conception of history as the very dimension of actualization and movement of rationality itself. In other words, the structures of intentional engagement on the part of rational subjects across history and cultures – structures that are taken to be fundamental in phenomenology for engendering any sense or meaning whatsoever – are themselves inherently historical: the history of reason, as field of manifestation of rationality, is the very condition of rational truth. Thus, the historicity of reason, as basic structural condition of rationality as such, becomes the very factor that for Merleau-Ponty is in need of investigation and clarification. This conception does not pit history against reason in a renewed form of relativism nor does it make history a deterministic or necessitating factor with respect

⁵⁸The integration into Husserl's phenomenology of historical considerations, developed against the backdrop of the Kantian distinction between reason and intellect, yields for Ricoeur a "philosophy of dynamic reason." See Ricoeur 1967, 156. Kant's conception of normative reason establishes a "rule" for the intellect. In light of this conception, Chiurazzi describes the cognitive operations of the intellect in terms of iterative processes both limited and guided in their accomplishments by reason as *terminus ad quem* of an ideally infinite process of approximation. See Chiurazzi 2017, 253-256.

⁵⁹Cf. Ricoeur on this point: "Reason is not an evolution, which would be equivalent to deriving sense from senselessness, nor is it merely an adventure, which would amount to an absurd succession of senselessness; it is a permanence in movement, the temporal self-actualization of an eternal and infinite identity of sense." Ricoeur 1967, 158. Cf. also *ibid.* 169.

to rational sense. Rather Merleau-Ponty rethinks the very sense of history as “limit” that is itself on route and in transformation. Accordingly, reason in history is no longer simply the progressive realization of an idea of concordance, permanence, and optimality, but rather primarily and fundamentally the engendering of discordance and deviation from normative sense.⁶⁰ The realization of rational normativity in history is correspondingly conceived as the very possibility of transcendence inherent in historical, social, cultural normative settings in which human rational activity is necessarily embedded but which this same activity can – and must – also reorient and further extend in accordance and in response to new historical situations and events, that is, in order *to make sense* of the latter. This opening of and to sense *is* history itself.

With reference to the paradigmatic example of painting, which however assumes in Merleau-Ponty a universal and ontological dimension, one must speak of a “cumulative” history in contrast with the idea of an “ironic” history. The latter is characterized by the struggle of self-enclosed historical ages against each other. On the other hand, “cumulative” history “is constituted and reconstituted step by step by the *interest* which bears us toward that which is not us and by that life which the past, in a continuous exchange, brings to us and finds in us, and which it continues to lead in each painter who revives, recaptures, and renews the entire undertaking of painting in each new work.”⁶¹

According to the conception of a cumulative or incremental history, the normativity of reason in history assumes not so much an iterative character guided by a perfection beyond the sensible or visible world. The normativity of reason exhibits rather a transgressive, transformative, and even revolutionary power inherent to this very world, a power which Merleau-Ponty clearly reads into the notion of “institution” in terms that need to be understood as bearing ontological meaning: “Revolution and institution: revolution is re-institution, leading up to reversal of previous institution,” institution “is not the contrary of the revolution: the revolution is another *Stiftung*.”⁶² The connection of the idea of transformative, and even emancipative reason with revolutionary character, with the notion of institution should make clear that the transformative conception of reason is not to be understood as simply countering order but rather as condition for maintaining order against the tendency of human obligations, norms, and habitual relations to repeat themselves, but also, and strictly connected with this tendency, to become indifferent and therefore favor disorder. If for Husserl the

⁶⁰One could perhaps characterize this distinction within phenomenology as a distinction between a “modal” and a “modalizing” conception of history. The distinction between *modality* and *modalization* is stressed by Steinbock. See Steinbock 2017, 124-125.

⁶¹S 75.

⁶²IP 42, 44.

movement of *ratio* in history is an incessant movement of self-clarification,⁶³ Merleau-Ponty may be said to describe the problem of reason in history as that of a *ratio negativa*. This negative reason, however, is anything but “negative,” for, like in Hegel, it is meant to describe the rationality of the real as inexhaustible openness, possibility, and novelty.⁶⁴

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⁶³“So ist Philosophie nichts anderes als Rationalismus, durch und durch, aber nach den verschiedenen Stufen der Bewegung von Intention und Erfüllung in sich unterschiedener Rationalismus, die *ratio in der ständigen Bewegung der Selbsterhellung*, angefangen von dem ersten Einbruch der Philosophie in die Menschheit, deren eingeborene Vernunft vordem noch ganz im Stande der Verslossenheit, der nächtlichen Dunkelheit war.” Hua VI, 273.

⁶⁴“Chez Hegel, comme on le répète sans cesse, tout ce qui est réel est rationnel, et donc justifié, - mais justifié tantôt comme acquisition véritable, tantôt comme pause, tantôt comme reflux et repli pour un nouvel élan, bref justifié relativement, à titre de moment de l’histoire totale, sous condition que cette histoire se fasse, et donc au sens où l’on dit que nos erreurs mêmes portent pierre, et que no progrès sont nos erreurs comprises, ce qui n’efface pas la différence des croissances et des déclines, des naissances et de morts, des régressions et des progrès.” S 89. In the same vein, but in the context of his philosophical reading of the discovery of incommensurable magnitudes, Chiurazzi writes in the last page of his book: “Su questo sfondo, quello della ridefinizione della ragione a partire dalla scoperta dell’incommensurabilità, in cui si intravede, come dice Hegel, il vero concetto della ragione, si deve allora rileggere la famosa tesi hegeliana secondo cui ‘il reale è razionale,’ altrimenti interpretata come una santificazione dello *status quo*. Intesa sulla base di *questo* concetto di ragione, essa non ha alcun significato conservativo. Nella sua *razionalità*, il reale impone infatti, come la $\sqrt{2}$, non una prosecuzione delle modalità consuete dell’esperienza, ma la loro trasformazione, mostrandosi come *possibilità*.” Chiurazzi 2017, 259.

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