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Example Précis

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Preface to *The Phenomenology of Perception*." Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Basic Writings*. Ed. Thomas Baldwin. New York: Routledge, 2004. 63-78.

This 1945 "Preface" is intended to answer the question "What is phenomenology?" and to justify it as the methodology of the long work of philosophical psychology to follow. Merleau-Ponty approaches this task by first setting out the apparent paradoxes and contradictory claims that have been advanced by phenomenology, in a long and eloquent survey section that is built on a series of "X, but also Y" rhetorical devices. He then surveys four prominent themes of phenomenology. Just as he does in the introductory section of the essay "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Merleau-Ponty here presents himself as the chief interpreter and champion of Husserl's later philosophy.

The first major theme considered is that phenomenology is a matter of *describing* the field of perception. This sets it in contrast to the prevalent *explanatory* methodologies of a) scientific empiricism and b) metaphysical idealism. Empirical science (such as mathematical physics) begins with observation, but then abstracts entirely from lived experience to consider idealized schematic cases (such as motion across a frictionless surface) that may reveal universal laws. Such a methodology is obviously fruitful in important respects, but is nonetheless naïve and dishonest in its renunciation of the specifics of observed events. The metaphysical idealism of Kant or Descartes likewise abstracts from the experienced particularity of perception to posit an "inner man" that constitutes the world according to

internal, transcendental principles. Merleau-Ponty's criticism is the same, whether these principles are “reason” of Rationalism, “the categories of understanding” of Critical Rationalism, or the rules governing the “association of ideas” posited by Empiricism. Phenomenology indicates that *perception* is not an act but a fact; the *world* is not an object but rather the unified setting of perception; and the *inner man* is a myth, along with his allegedly privileged access to univocal *truth*.

The second theme is the technique of “phenomenological reduction,” the suspension of belief in the assemblage of everyday assumptions known as the “natural attitude.” Husserl's understanding of the reduction long led him to an idealist position: that all particular consciousnesses are united in a transcendental ego. Merleau-Ponty argues that the problems of distinguishing Self and Other, and the problematic status of the body as subject-object, finally lead Husserlian phenomenology in a different direction. The complete phenomenological reduction proves to be impossible; the discovery that we are incarnate “being-in-the-world” does away with any kind of idealism.

Merleau-Ponty then addresses the status of the “essences” (*eidōs*) treated so prominently in phenomenology. Rather than making essences the objects of knowledge, as the ends of reflection (as in Platonism or scientific positivism), Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology treats essences as means. Reflection on essences of things discloses that things and not just words have meaning. This meaning is itself pre-reflective and prior to language, though its constitution in perception is discovered via philosophical reflection. It is the bedding or ground in which truth can be understood.

Finally, Merleau-Ponty explores the much-overworked notion of “intentionality,”

urging us beyond the simple and established formulas. “Consciousness always has an object,” indeed; Merleau-Ponty stresses the neglected theme of unity of that object. The world, as object of consciousness, is perceived as “unified.” There is no basis for appeal to a prior transcendental unity of subject to account for this character of perception. The presented unity of any intended object has significant implications for all spheres of knowledge; Merleau-Ponty here offers provocative suggestions for re-thinking historiography.

In conclusion, Merleau-Ponty suggests that phenomenology offers a methodology for inquiry into the world rather than a theoretical explanation of the world. This distinction implies a shift in the goals of inquiry: not to discover pre-existing truth, but rather to develop understanding and, analogous to art, to “bring truth into being.” It also implies a suspension of typical metaphysical commitments: a willingness to consider process rather than fixity of object, to regard ourselves as nexus of meanings rather than persistent beings, and to regard philosophy as an ongoing infinite dialogue and meditation on the world.

(675 words)