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THE METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF
PHENOMENOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

It is not the purpose of this study to rethink the phenomenological method itself, but to consider the way it is applied to the field of aesthetics, and to bring out the main problems and results of that application. In other words, we shall attempt to review the methodological foundations on which phenomenological aesthetics relies when confronting art phenomena.

It is known that Husserl's main contribution to phenomenological literature lies in his originating and outlining a method for thought and philosophizing. His main purpose was not to give us philosophical instructions, but to teach us how to philosophize. On the other side, one can say that the main purpose of Husserl's followers lies in their elaborating and employing this method in various fields of philosophy. The field of aesthetics in particular has become one of the most fruitful areas in which the seeds of the phenomenological method have been sown.

There is a good reason why the field of the phenomena of art was convenient and fertile ground for the employment of the phenomenological method. We should remember in the first place that the phenomena which phenomenology studies are not something other than conscious experiences, for phenomena are what appears to consciousness. That is why intentional experiences, of which the main feature is "a consciousness of" or "an appearing to" are called "phenomena."¹ Similarly, art phenomena are experiences of a certain type of objects which we call aesthetic objects. We should also remember that phenomenology presents itself only as a method for reformulating our perceptive and imaginative experiences and, in general, all of our conscious experiences. Since artistic or aesthetic experiences (which may appear in a creative aesthetic process or in a perceptive aesthetic experience) are among these experiences, it was natural that an intimate encounter between art as a domain of experience and phenomenology as a method for understanding experience would occur — even though it was an encounter which came later than expected.

It is worth noting here that there is a certain affinity between

aesthetic vision or experience and the phenomenological method itself. Husserl himself noticed that the way in which the phenomenological reduction proceeds is an analogue of the core of the aesthetic experience.² However, this issue lies beyond our purpose, and it is more important for our purpose to turn now to consideration of the way in which phenomenology deals with artistic phenomena, of what distinguishes phenomenological aesthetic research from traditional aesthetics.

Undoubtedly, the methodological character of the research is the central and main feature which distinguishes the phenomenological approach to aesthetic phenomena from the traditional aesthetic attitudes, for the principles on which phenomenological aesthetic research relies are derived from the phenomenological method itself, while traditional attitudes rely on non-methodological principles derived from the metaphysical attitude which the philosopher adopts. In considering aesthetic phenomena or any other phenomena, the phenomenologist does not proceed from a theoretical framework or with any philosophical presuppositions, but he rather proceeds in his research from what we may call "vacant methodological frames," i.e., frames which have no pre-determined content.

Accordingly, phenomenological aesthetic research dismisses all the metaphysical interpretations of art and rejects any interpretation that determines a priori criteria for aesthetic experience, for such interpretations are not methodologically abstracted, verified, and refined through descriptive analysis, but, rather, serve metaphysical purposes. This holds good for the Kantian critique of aesthetic judgement, the Hegelian dialectical interpretation of art, and the contemplative intuitive aesthetic attitudes of Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Croce. Such systems were subordinated to the metaphysical foundations on which they rely. In the faculty of feeling Kant has found a mediate link between the domain of necessity and that of freedom. Hegel's view of art as a sensuous manifestation of the Idea was demanded by his metaphysical dialecticism, since he considered art as a moment in the temporal process of the spirit. Schopenhauer found in aesthetic experience pure intuitive metaphysical contemplation free from the servitude of the restless will and the limitations of time, space, and causality. In agreement with Schopenhauer, Bergson and Croce considered art as a kind of intuitive apprehension in opposition to the logical and scientific knowledge which depends upon abstract concepts. In spite of the fact that these attitudes are completely different in their details, there is a

common feature which connects them, that is, each of them was the product of the systematic view of the world which the philosopher's imagination and contemplation drew. This also may hold good for the symbolic attitude which interprets art as part of a network of symbols which mediates between man and the world with its objects, and for the pragmatic attitude which derived its conception of aesthetic experience from a predetermined meaning of experience in general and, thus, it could not understand aesthetic experience apart from the context of everyday life or practical experience.

Generally speaking, phenomenology rejects such attitudes because they adopt interpretations that depend upon presuppositions, and instead of seeing the meaning in experience, they impose meaning on experience. This does not mean, however, that these interpretations are necessarily false and of no value, for they, undoubtedly, contain many correct and careful insights concerning the metaphysical significance of art and aesthetic experience. It is worth noting here that phenomenology also tries to reveal the metaphysical significance of art and aesthetic experience. In proceeding in this task, however, phenomenology does not rely on any metaphysical foundations, but only on what can be seen in, and only in, experience. Thus, one can say that phenomenology does not reject these interpretations of traditional attitudes for their content, but for their lack of methodological procedure. Consequently, this phenomenological rejection does not mean that phenomenology tries to refute these attitudes or to combat them drawing upon proofs and demonstrations, for what matters to phenomenology is not an interpretation or a point of view which has to be demonstrated, but rather different point of departure. Phenomenologically, this means that phenomenology "brackets" these attitudes.

It is also important for our purpose to note that the phenomenological rejection of the attitudes in question due to their lack of methodology does not imply that any methodological attitude or theory is accepted by phenomenology. Methods of research into psychological attitudes, for example, are not the methods which phenomenologists intend when they look forward to making aesthetics a methodological science. Psychoanalysis and experimental psychology are in their approaches two main examples of these attitudes rejected by phenomenological aesthetics:

Within the psychoanalytic attitude, the process of artistic creation is interpreted by probing to the unconscious life of the creator, and the

work of art is considered as a kind of dream or an unconscious explosion that reaches into conscious life, that is, as a kind of projection or sublimation of the content of the unconscious. According to the phenomenological standpoint, this attitude confines itself to the borderlines of the creative process and neglects the aesthetic experience as appreciation, which is a main concern of phenomenologists working in the field of aesthetics. Even with regard to the interpretation of the creative process itself, the psychoanalytic attitude commits a great error when it interprets the work of art with respect to the artist and his private life, that is, to an empirical ego or subject. Thus, it transcends the given, that is, the work of art, and reaches to something which lies beyond our experience; it transcends the aesthetic and reaches to the non-aesthetic. If we are to stay in the domain of what is given to our experience, we should consider the artist solely through his work; for the artist, according to phenomenological aesthetics, should be nothing more than his artistic product. We are to then recognize his intention or his phenomenological ego through his work, through the given which is the artist's intention as it is manifested in a physical expression. In reading Stendhal, Merleau-Ponty says, "I get closer and closer to him until in the end I read his works with the very same intention that he gave to them."³ This means that I recognize the writer's (or the artist's) intentions, his vision of the world and his style of expression or creation, only through the context of his creative product. Consequently, there is no justification for assuming two kinds of intentions, one of which translates the other, for in that case we would assume two subjects: one of them would live outside the work of art, that is, the artist with his psychological intentions contained in his fancies, motives, and motions, and the other would be the artist as he expresses these psychological intentions. Generally speaking, the interpretation of the work of art or the aesthetic process through examination of the life of the artist or of his private experience is a matter which phenomenological aesthetics dismisses from the field of aesthetic research and "brackets."

On the other hand, the attitude of experimental psychology has attempted to constitute an aesthetics, in opposition to the contemplative aesthetics which relies on general theories and metaphysical presuppositions, on an empirical method which begins with particular facts from which it abstracts through generalization laws which interpret aesthetic phenomena. This attitude prides itself in having presented a scientific descriptive study derived from experiment. But this is exactly

what phenomenological aesthetics rejects, for it does not seek to interpret aesthetic experience, or aesthetic phenomena in general, through generalizations experimentally abstracted, but rather through insight into the essences of aesthetic phenomena. According to phenomenology, the scientific character proper to human sciences is not to be attained by following the methods of the exact sciences, for the empirical science of facts should be based on the science of concrete essences. Thus, phenomenological psychology, which is an a priori pure science of essences, is, as Husserl taught us,⁴ the basic methodological foundation on which a rigorous experimental psychology can be based.

Above all, it is the characteristic of the phenomenological aesthetic that it does not take its point of departure from any relative subjectivism, whatever its form may be. It, rather, takes its departure from the modest simple fact that there are, on the one hand, works of art, and, on the other hand, experiences of these works. Now, the main question which the approach of phenomenological aesthetics tries to answer is: How do works of art occur in our experience? However, putting the question as such, is not enough to determine the point of departure of phenomenological aesthetics, for the same question may arouse certain problematic issues. For example, it is taken for granted that aesthetic experience comes to be in a culture world; for works of art live and manifest themselves in that world, and we learn how to recognize and appreciate them through that world in which we live. This means that works of art as cultural products vary according to the variation of the cultural world not only in different ages, but also in one and the same age. This also holds good for one and same work of art, for, as Ingarden remarked, "any work of art (and this operates differently for the different arts) passes through various periods of brilliance, that is periods in which it attracts frequent and correct aesthetic concretions, and other periods when its attractiveness is weakened or even disappears if it is no longer 'legible' to its public."⁵ All these facts are true, and phenomenologists acknowledge them. However, they do not see in these facts any justification for adopting historical relativism; for, as Dufrenne puts it, ". . . the historicity of artistic production, the diversity of art forms and of judgments of taste, no more imply a relativism destructive of an eidetic of art than the historicity of the ethos implies a similar relativism in Scheler's eidetic of moral values."⁶ The same observation was repeatedly made by Ingarden in several places in his writings. He asserts that the diversity and the deviations in under-

standing and appreciating the work, and the alternate periods of obscurity it passes through which do not imply that the value of the work is relative or that the work is then deprived of its value, but that this only means that the work has been manifested in false concretions. He declares: "A literary work of art can be expressed for centuries in such masked, falsifying concretizations, until finally someone is found who in one way or another understands it correctly, who sees it adequately, and who shows its true form to others."⁷ This means that the work of art, if we are to use Heideggerian terms, still "awaits" those who can understand its truth and "preserve" its essence.

Thus, phenomenological aesthetic research does not take its point of departure from any historical relativism; for "what we discover in history," as Dufrenne puts it, ". . . is not altogether historical. We are persuaded of this by art itself, which is perhaps a more universal language than rational discourse, and does its best to deny the kind of time in which civilizations perish."⁸ This means that phenomenological research tries with the help of an eidetic elucidation of the empirical facts, that is, of the works of art, which manifest themselves throughout history to discover the essences of art phenomena which manifest themselves beyond the limits of history. Thus, the process of ideation begins with the empirical fact only insofar as it is an example through which we can achieve insight into its *eidōs*.

In addition, phenomenological aesthetics rejects relativistic subjectivism in its psychologistic form. The traditional form of psychologism in the field of aesthetics tended to consider aesthetic experience as mere aesthetic enjoyment which involves pleasures, emotions, and pleasant experiences. This enjoyment, according to psychologism, is a condition for the judgment of taste or the achievement of aesthetic experience. In opposition, phenomenologists acknowledge the fact that this enjoyment and experience of pleasure actually occurs in our aesthetic experience, but, nevertheless they do not see in them any condition for our aesthetic judgment or experience. For aesthetic experience is not a psychic subjective process which aims at arousing our enjoyment; rather, this enjoyment is something aroused as a result of our experience of the aesthetic object, and which is to be described only on that ground. Thus, the concept of aesthetic enjoyment in phenomenological aesthetics is radically different from the traditional subjective psychologistic form of the concept. Moritz Geiger's *Beiträge Zur Phänomenologie des ästhetischen Genuses* is considered the

pioneer contribution to phenomenological aesthetics in this respect. Through an eidetic descriptive analysis, Geiger was able to refine and distinguish the feelings which occur in aesthetic enjoyment from those of pleasure, joy . . . etc., and to dismiss from aesthetic feeling the non-aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic emotions which occur in the experiences of the insensitive and unqualified observer. This is why Geiger rejects the experimental aesthetics, closely related to psychologism, which assumes that every aesthetic experience is a kind of enjoyment, whatever this enjoyment may be, and which, thus, neglects the fact that the enjoyment which occurs in our aesthetic experience can only be recognized as enjoyment of an aesthetic object. Despite the fact that Geiger's contribution was partial in comparison to other phenomenological treatments which transcend the limits of aesthetic feeling or enjoyment and extend to other experiences which add to the texture of aesthetic experience,⁹ it offered a good model for these other treatments which, then approached this issue in a similar manner. Like Geiger, other phenomenologists reject the psychologistic perspective on aesthetic enjoyment. For example, Ingarden stresses the intentional character of aesthetic feeling, that is, feeling which is directed toward the aesthetic object; and Dufrenne stresses so extremely the non-psychologistic nature of aesthetic feeling that he speaks of this feeling as a feeling of the aesthetic object itself.

However, the fact that phenomenological aesthetics does not consider the aesthetic object with respect to our subjective enjoyment or feelings does not imply that it attempts to understand the aesthetic object through an objective perspective of the beautiful as if the beautiful were a rational concept or an abstract idea which may be classified in categories according to objective criteria. Phenomenological aesthetics does not appeal to the idea of beauty and of the beautiful as a point of departure for aesthetic research; for this procedure is, in fact, the way of traditional aesthetics which was not free of the philosophy of art, that is, from those philosophical concepts concerning art, beauty and the beautiful. That is why Dufrenne says: ". . . it is not we who decide what is the beautiful. The [aesthetic] object itself decides."¹⁰ This means that we can recognize the beautiful only through our recognition of the essence of the object in which the beautiful manifests itself. Phenomenologically, the recognition of the essence of the aesthetic object means the analysis and description of its structure, and this structural analysis will supply us with an "objective"

foundation for the description of our "subjective" experience.¹¹ Only in this sense can we understand the meaning of "objectivity" in phenomenological aesthetics: it is the objectivity of aesthetic research, and not the objectivity of categories or a priori criteria which determine what is beauty or the beautiful. In fact, considering the beautiful according to pre-determined categories or criteria will involve us in either subjectivity or objectivity, for these criteria will fall into two types: we will judge the beautiful according to either emotional subjective elements or according to elements independent from the aesthetic object and our experience of it. In the first case, we will be involved in an exercise of psychologistic subjectivism, and in the other, in one of dogmatic or naive objectivism.

It is precisely from this point that we can arrive at the main starting point of phenomenological aesthetic research, a point which is radically different from that of traditional aesthetic research in all of its philosophical and psychological forms. This fact may be demonstrated as follows.

It is the character of phenomenological aesthetics that it takes its point of departure from the phenomenological epistemology which attempts to find a third way beyond subjectivism and objectivism in their traditional forms, a way which transcends the dichotomy of subject and object. This means a reformation and a new understanding of experience. Husserl himself criticized modern philosophy which lost understanding of human experience when it "forgot" the experience of the "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*), and thus forgot man as a human-being in the world. In fact, the idea of the experience of the life-world is rooted in the origin of the idea of the intentionality of experience; for both of them spring from the same origin, that is, from the principle of transcending subject/object dualism and the distinction between inner and outer experience, the distinction to which, as Landgrebe puts it, "the confusions' in philosophy and especially in the theory of knowledge should be traced."¹² But where the idea of intentionality represents the phenomenological principle on the level of consciousness in its relation to the world with its objects where consciousness is vacant and contains nothing but this movement (which makes it ever directed to its objects through an operative intention which tries to understand them), the idea of the life-world represents this principle on the level of the experience of the pre-given world which, if we are to use Merleau-Ponty's words, "is always 'already there' before reflection begins — as an "inalienable presence . . ."¹³

It was natural that this epistemological difference between phenomenology and traditional philosophy would extend to the treatment of aesthetic experience. In this respect, one can say that phenomenology no longer considers aesthetic experience from either the side of the subject or that of the object but that it understands it, as it can only be understood, through the mutual implication of the subject and the object. With respect to the object, phenomenological research into aesthetic experience breaks entirely with that sort of research which pays no attention to the subject, i.e., it breaks with research into objective characteristics and criteria of the beautiful or of what may affect us as being beautiful. But phenomenological research, at the same time, rejects research that neglects the aesthetic object when considering the subject's role in the aesthetic process whether on the level of aesthetic perception or that of aesthetic creation. In a previous study, "Schopenhauer's *Metaphysics of Art*," we have shown that the metaphysical attitudes which have considered art to be a mere vision and the work of art to be equivalent to the vision of the artist, not only neglect the aesthetic object as a style of expression which aims at communicating the work to the observer, but also do not do justice to the role of the observer and confine it to the mere reproduction of the artist's vision. In this case, the aesthetic object disappears and its being is lost between two subjects which are, in fact, one subject that has a double face: the one producing a vision, and the other reproducing it; and thus the aesthetic object with its appearance, sensuous surface, and its potential meanings disappears and is degraded to serving as a mere medium or a stimulus arousing the observer to grasp the artist's vision.

In contrast, phenomenological aesthetics transcends both perspectives: the purely objective perspective which neglects the subjects' role, and the subjective perspective which neglects the object — and which we may call "the static subjective perspective," for this later perspective supposes that the work of art is a product of a process of "static creation" on the level of vision or imaginative contemplation, and considers the contemplation of this work to be the contemplation of a merely receptive subject. By transcending the two perspectives, the subject becomes coherent with the object in aesthetic experience, for the aesthetic object becomes that object which is constituted through the experience of the observer, and not the object which is constituted independently and prior to the experience of the perceiver. In this case, the subject has an effective role, and an integration between the role of

the artist and that of the observer in aesthetic experience, or between, to use Ingarden's terms, the transmitting intention of the artist and the receptive intention of the observer, becomes apparent. The reception of the work by the observer is no longer a mere reception, but an *intending* reception, i.e., a reception of an experience directed to its object which needs that experience in order to be constituted and manifested. The subject, as well, now retrieves its value and effectiveness when the object retrieves its value and is no longer a mere stimulus, but a crucible in which the subject of the artist and the subject of the perceiver are fused, or it becomes, at least, a point at which an intimate encounter between the two intentions is achieved.

Now, we may have observed that the epistemological principle from which the phenomenological treatment of aesthetic experience take its departure is itself the principle which transcends the dualism of subject and object in the understanding the nature of experience in general, and that it is also the idea of the intentionality of consciousness, and that it is finally the idea of the lived experience. Thus, this principle has sometimes appeared in the treatment of aesthetic experience embodied in the intentional relation between consciousness and its object, as we find in Ingarden's treatment of aesthetic experience as an experience of a pure intentional object and in Sartre's treatment of the experience of the work of art as an imaginative intention of an unreal object. At other times, this principle has appeared embodied in the idea of the lived experience, i.e., primary direct experience prior to the act of conscious reflection, the pre-reflective experience of the living and concrete present. This has apparently been the approach taken by Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne, for they understood aesthetic experience as an experience which starts in the direct presence of its aesthetic object before the body and perception.¹⁴ However, it is worth noting here that the idea of the lived experience is not distinct from the idea of intentionality in its deep sense, but is a development of its significance and a transcending of its limits within the level of consciousness to reach the level of the act and dynamism.

Phenomenological research into the level of the act and dynamism has become a necessary for an adequate understanding of the creative process. In spite of the fact that, aesthetic experience was a common concern of phenomenologists working in aesthetics, there has been a considerable lack in phenomenological literature treating the aesthetic

experience as an act of creation. This lack may be ascribed to the fact that most phenomenological aesthetic research has been mainly devoted to the treatment of the work of art as an intentional object or as a correlate of the experience of the receiver. In her criticism of Ingarden's aesthetics, A-T. Tymieniecka has observed that the mere intentional analysis of the work of art and of the corresponding aesthetic experience fails to grasp the creative process that engendered and produced the work.¹⁵ According to Tymieniecka, the treatment of the work of art as a mere receptive experience "can not take into account, nor does it allow an approach to the work of art directly from the point of view of the *act of creation* of the work."¹⁶ However, the problematic question which can be raised at this point is: can we overcome the fact that the work of art is *what is directly given* to our experience and undertake an approach to the work *directly* from the point of view of the act of creation which is not directly given to our experience? To state the question briefly: can we understand the given through the ungiven without any deviation from precise descriptive analysis. It is quite clear that the work of art is a noematic correlate of a first creative act. However, the noematic correlate, as repeatedly asserted by Husserl, has priority within the phenomenological intentional analysis.¹⁷ In fact, we agree with Professor Tymieniecka that the creative process should be interpreted on the level of the phenomenology of the act. And it is my contention that Merleau-Ponty was able to supply us with many insights concerning the creative process only because he deals with this process in the light of his phenomenological treatment of the body as a mobile animate apparatus of intentions and acts¹⁸ (a treatment which as it has been developed by Dufrenne has been devoted mainly to the analysis of the experience of the perceiver). But it is also my contention that the treatment of the creative process should be based on an eidetic structural analysis of the work of art, an analysis which can guarantee a safety factor and a rigorous foundation for any further treatments; for the question with which phenomenological aesthetics should begin is: *What* is the nature, i.e., the essence and the structure, of the *created entity* which we call the work of art? On the basis of the answer of this question, we can answer another one: *How* is this entity *created*?

Without doubt, the development of phenomenological aesthetic research deserves a separate study. We only hope that, our study has

laid bare the main foundations on which phenomenological aesthetics builds.

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NOTES

¹ E. Husserl, "Phenomenology," in *Husserl's Shorter Works*, Peter McCormick and Frederick Eliston, eds. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 22f.

² For a description of the affinity between the aesthetic perception and the phenomenological approach, see E. Husserl, *Ideas . . .*, trans. Boyce Gibson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), p. 311, and pp. 200–201. See also Fritz Kaufman, "Art and Phenomenology," in *Essays in Phenomenology*. Maurice Natanson, ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), pp. 144–156.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (London: Heinmann Educational Books, 1973), p. 12.

⁴ Husserl, "Phenomenology," *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁵ Roman Ingarden, "Artistic and Aesthetic Values," in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1964, 201.

⁶ Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward Casey *et al.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. liii.

⁷ Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 240.

⁸ Dufrenne, *op. cit.*, p. liv.

⁹ It is worth noting here that aesthetic experience, as the phenomenological aesthetics of Ingarden and Dufrenne demonstrates, is not a single experience, but a complex of experiences tightly interwoven, and the term "experience" is often used in its single form for the sake of simplicity.

¹⁰ Dufrenne, *op. cit.*, p. lxii.

¹¹ According to phenomenology, every experience is subjective, not in the sense that the object of this experience is *merely personal or relative* to a subject, nor in the sense that the object is *dependent upon* a subject, but only in the sense that it is *related to* a subject. (For an extended analysis of this point, see Herbert Spiegelberg, "How Subjective is Phenomenology?" in *Essays in Phenomenology*, pp. 137–143.)

¹² Ludwig Landgrebe, "The Phenomenological Concept of Experience," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1973, p. 5.

¹³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin, Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p. vii.

¹⁴ However, this is represented by Dufrenne only on the level of the aesthetic experience of the spectator, in its first moment.

¹⁵ A-T. Tymieniecka, "Beyond Ingarden's Idealism/Realism Controversy with Husserl — The New Contextual Phase of Phenomenology," in *Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. IV, pp. 331–334.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

¹⁷ See for example: E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns, §§17, 20–21.

¹⁸ However, the main defect in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of aesthetic phenomena lies in the fact that he enclosed himself within the limits of his phenomenology of the body and perception, and thus he confined the structure of the work of art to a mere sensuous gestural expression, and could not understand the compound character of aesthetic experience whether on the level of creation or the level of appreciation. In his last writings, especially in *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty was trying hard to overcome this position through a bestowal of ontological dimensions upon his philosophical approach.