

# Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

## *Postfoundational Phenomenology: Husserlian Reflections on Presence and Embodiment*

JAMES MENSCH

University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001; 280 pages.

“[B]eginning in the 1920s ... Husserl ... focussed increasingly on embodiment.... [H]e sought in a series of largely unpublished manuscripts to describe presence, in particular self-presence, in terms of embodiment. What unifies his descriptions is the thought that presence and embodiment imply each other: to be present is to be engaged in some form of embodiment and vice versa. The self, taken as a place of presence, is formed by the entanglement of the two. Concretely, this means that things are present to us insofar as they affect us bodily. Similarly, our own self-presence is founded on our bodily self-affection” (2). In his *Postfoundational Phenomenology*, Professor Mensch joins Donn Welton (*The Other Husserl*) and Nam-in Lee (*Edmund Husserl's Phänomenologie der Instinkte*) in the study and presentation of this later and largely unknown Husserl—the Husserl “post” the Husserl of the “pure phenomenological observer” and the Cartesian style of phenomenology, the Husserl of the posthumous manuscripts, by way of a study of these manuscripts held in the Husserl archives in Louvain.

Mensch's book serves two purposes: first, and at its core, it is a window into the thought of the Husserl of the Nachlaß, and thus a work of historical scholarship (Chapters 2 through 5); second, it is an evaluation of the importance and implications of this later Husserl for contemporary philosophy (which attempts to move the historically interesting retrieval of the later Husserl into the heart of current philosophical debates), and thus a philosophical project in its own right (Chapters 1 and 6–8). Indeed, Mensch argues that it is Husserl, the apparent culmination of the modernist project, rather than the so-called “postmoderns,” represented for Mensch by Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, who overcomes modernism. The postmoderns, we are told, remain within the modernist problematic of the dialectic between ground and grounded by merely inverting, but not displacing, the terms presence and absence, and thus offer a new kind of foundationalism, the desire for which they share with the moderns. It is Husserl, so Mensch's thesis goes, who truly displaces the modernist project by thinking presence outside of the dialectic of ground and grounded, and does so precisely by thinking of presence as embodiment.

It is to an account of this relationship between presence and embodiment, at the root of the nonfoundational phenomenology of the later Husserl, that Mensch turns in what might be called his “expositional” chapters. The thrust of the thesis put forth here is that being is to be conceived as embodied functioning: “To do so is to say that being is present where it is materially ‘at work,’ where it functions by embodying itself” (11). “The contents of consciousness,” on this analysis, come to presence as they affect an embodied consciousness that is already itself turned toward them as instinctual striving, and the self comes to self-presence as self-affection, as the feeling of itself as being so affected. This coming to presence does not, therefore, rest upon any prior absence, but is primordial; it is the “welling up” of “life” itself, and that

is possible only in an embodied being—that is, one susceptible to, and oriented toward, affecting contents. At the root of consciousness, at the root of life (and thus of thought), is the correlation, the fit, between affecting contents and the affected consciousness (for that which does not “fit” never comes to presence, and is not therefore absent, but simply *is* not). It is only in the attempt to “retain” these affecting contents (those that meet bodily, instinctual needs) in the face of the presentation of ever new affecting contents, that the temporal stretching involved in retention and protention is constituted, and the “absence” of those contents now slipping into the past, and those anticipated in the future, comes to light—but only *after* their original “presentation.” The constituting ego itself, and the constituted “things” it intends as transcendent to itself, are both derived from this original “coming to presence”—such that for this later Husserl, on Mensch’s reading, the absence which the postmoderns take as constitutive of the presence of the ego to itself is itself derived from a more originary presence; indeed, alterity is introduced as the difference between presence (as the original coming to presence) and that which is presented (to an already derivative constituting ego): “The distinction, here, is between the borderless living presence in its welling up and the same presence located by the thematization of what wells up. Located presence has the being in time that allows it to be present as some entity. The presence that is so presented can be that of either an objective self or thing. The borderless, anonymously presenting presence is actually neither” (229).

More specifically, in the first of the four “expositional” chapters (Chapter 2), Mensch lays out the later Husserl’s analysis of the instincts as a necessary condition for the coming to presence of the self and things, by way of the constitution of temporality and reason. The obvious objection to this theory, that it employs, in its use of the “instincts,” the terms of the science of biology and thus is, rather than a phenomenology, precisely the kind of naturalism that Husserl himself always warned against, Mensch answers briefly—perhaps too briefly—in his introductory chapter, arguing that as a “descriptive idealism,” Husserl’s theory of the instincts avoids biologism—“abstracts from its biological basis”—insofar as “its attention to the phenomena is an attention to the connections it manifests, the very connections that must be present for presence to be constituted, [which] holds even when we speak about the emergence of consciousness” (17). In Chapter 3, Mensch lays out four classical requirements for freedom that he gleans from the history of philosophy and, by piecing together analyses from the later writings, shows how Husserl’s embodied self meets those requirements. This is followed by a chapter giving a more precise exposition of how the coming to presence of things and of itself is temporalized for the embodied self, and in particular how within this self a sense of the future is constituted. In the last of these expositional chapters, Chapter 5, Mensch attempts to use the analyses of the later Husserl to provide a solution to the problem of qualia, i.e., how we move from the possession of data to conscious experience.

The remaining chapters attempt to bring this postfoundational Husserl into critical dialogue with the postmoderns: Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida. In Chapter 6, the issue is language, and herein Derrida’s critique of Husserl’s distinction between indication and expression is reexamined from the perspective of the work of the later Husserl. After a close reading of Derrida’s critique, Mensch argues that Derrida’s

emerging position (that presence is a product of the process of supplementation as required by the pre-original absence inherent in the difference/deferral that is *différance*, and so necessarily excludes any primordial presence) effectively cuts language off from the world, and he counters with Husserl's view that language requires *both* absence and presence. It is the retention of the *impressions* of contents as they are displaced by new impressions that thus continue to be present *as impressions*, even when that which left these impressions is now absent, and this provides language with its connection to the world. True, the presence of "things" to consciousness is constituted across the consistency (the fitting-togetherness) of retained, present, and anticipated contents but, as Husserl maintains, a constituted presence is still a presence.

In Chapter 7, the issue is the origin of ethics. Against Heidegger and Levinas, who base the origin of ethics in absence (in my absence from myself in the futurity of my death in the case of Heidegger, and the absence of the other in his or her mortality in Levinas), Mensch, through Husserl, wants to demonstrate that the origin of ethics is founded, rather, in a kind of co-presence of myself and the other. Mensch's main polemic against Heidegger and Levinas is that the alterity of death, its trauma, even if it were able to present itself, would not solicit our attention, but would provoke flight. Furthermore, death, even on the terms of Heidegger and Levinas, could not present itself at all, and the supposed impetus to ethics proposed by these two thinkers is, in principle, incapable of fulfilling its alleged function. We are driven, then, on Mensch's view, to seek the origin of ethics (which issues in conscience and the face to face relationship) in the coming to presence of the other for me in the welling up of life itself, such that ethics, for Mensch, needs to be oriented to life and not to death, to presence rather than absence. My instinctual "responsibility" to preserve my own life, here, extends to the preservation of the other who shares this life with me.

Aside from the possible objection that this correlation of Heidegger and Levinas masks the true depth of the Levinasian critique of Heidegger, and gives us a distorted reading of Levinas (for example, the alterity of the other in Levinas is not qualified by the inaccessibility of his past and future to me, as if his alterity were an epistemological limitation, as Mensch reads it, but is a calling into question of the *rights* of my epistemological grasping in the first place), one wonders whether the exclusion of death on phenomenological grounds is really effective here; is the point (especially in the case of Levinas) not rather the disruption of phenomenology itself? More generally, it is not at all evident to me, even after reading Mensch's text, that absence functions for any of these postmoderns as a "ground," as Mensch claims, at least not in any way that is genuinely analogous to the ground sought by modern philosophers, even if Mensch is correct in noting certain "formal" similarities between these two styles of thinking. Mensch reads the postmoderns as *anti-* (inverted or negatively) foundational phenomenologists, and therefore suggests that Husserl's more thoroughgoing *postfoundational* phenomenology is the true antidote to modernism. But these postmoderns can be (and perhaps should be) more radically read as *postphenomenological*, where phenomenology itself (rather than the ground-grounded relationship) is taken as the actual continuation of the modern project. *If* a break with the modern is required, which strategy most effectively performs this task? Still, the question remains: does absence come first, as constitutive of presence (as in Heidegger,

Levinas, and Derrida, according to Mensch), or second, as derived from the present taken as the welling up of ever new contents for a pre-egological and pre-temporal consciousness (as in Husserl)? Do we seek the conditions of presence in absence or the conditions of absence in presence? Or, to put the question otherwise, how far down can phenomenology go? Can we answer this question itself phenomenologically? We may or may not be convinced by Mensch's polemical arguments against the ability of the absence introduced by death (my own for Heidegger, and for the other for Levinas) to bring about the constitution of the responsible self, as we may or may not find convincing the critique of Derrida's claim that *différance* underlies the possibility for language, but Mensch does at least give us a Husserl who suggests that the derivation of presence from original absence is not the only coherent philosophical option.

Mensch writes with remarkable clarity and with sufficient repetition to reinforce important points without belaboring them. Husserl scholars will have to judge as to whether the details of exposition and interpretation are accurate, but if one of the goals of this book is to introduce those of us acquainted only with the "standard" Husserl to this later, "other" Husserl, to give us a sense of his depth and potential significance for ongoing philosophical problems in dialogue with philosophers who have in many cases defined their own positions contra the standard Husserl, and to whet our appetite for further investigation, then Mensch succeeds admirably. As this book, among others, makes clear, Mensch is both a scholar and thinker of substance, and whether or not we are convinced by his thesis that it is the Husserl of the *Nachlaß* who provides the better way through the postmodern problematics, the challenge this book poses to a post-Husserlian, postphenomenological "orthodoxy" is worthy of long and concerted attention.

JEFFREY DUDIAK, *The King's University College*

**Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium**

ANDRZEJ WIERCINSKI, Ed.

Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2003; 731 pages.

The objective of this collection of no less than fifty essays, written by prominent North American and European scholars in hermeneutics, is not to reveal how a plurality of interpretations merges into a unified claim regarding Ricoeur's writings. Rather, the purpose of *Between Suspicion and Sympathy*, the third volume in the Hermeneutic Series of the International Institute for Hermeneutics, is to offer a variety of conflicting and complementary interpretations. A Festschrift in honor of today's most important representative of philosophical hermeneutics, this volume offers a variety of approaches toward Ricoeur's work, allowing differences to emerge so that they may give rise to new interpretations of his multifaceted oeuvre.

The volume presents a number of perspectives on specific aspects of Ricoeur's philosophy and builds bridges between his thought and several traditions. Since a