

Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception

RENAUD BARBARAS

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Renaud Barbaras has emerged in recent years as a leading authority on the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Although founded primarily on Barbaras' main work, *De l'être du phénomène: Sur l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty*, first published in 1991 (an English translation appeared in 2004), this reputation is also based on subsequent contributions, including *Le tournant de l'expérience: Recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty* (1998), as well as his involvement in the edition and publication of course notes from some of Merleau-Ponty's Collège de France lectures in the late 1950s. It would be wrong, however, to link Barbaras too closely with Merleau-Ponty. While he now occupies the sort of authoritative position *vis-à-vis* Merleau-Ponty that was once (and, to some extent, still is) held by Claude Lefort, for example, there is something significantly different now. Whereas Lefort, a close living link to Merleau-Ponty, can be said to have elaborated—in highly original ways, to be sure—an *extension* of Merleau-Ponty's thought, Barbaras' approach to the Merleau-Pontyan *œuvre* is to situate it squarely in the past. Rather than taking it up as an open-ended work in progress, Barbaras aims for interpretive closure, in particular with regard to the unfinished manuscript of *The Visible and the Invisible*. Thus, contrary to the kid-gloved attitude that characterizes much specialist scholarship, with Barbaras there is no lament over Merleau-Ponty's untimely death, no defensive speculation about what might have been. Instead, Barbaras critically and forcefully engages with Merleau-Ponty's extant work as a source of definite contributions that are to be assessed on the basis of their philosophical merits alone.

Barbaras' basic question concerns perception as the originary mode of access to being, and in particular whether a *phenomenology* of perception can come to terms with itself in a sufficiently consistent and critical way as to provide a genuine *philosophy* of perception. While Barbaras is confident that the latter could only be attained through a phenomenological approach, his question is whether this is in fact possible (he does not think that Merleau-Ponty himself fully pulled this off). As an "introduction" to this ultimately ontological problem, Barbaras' aim in *Desire and Distance* is to rethink key phenomenological concepts in order to ascertain and assess the ontological implications of phenomenology's claim to offer philosophical access to reality at the primordial level.

This is, however, by no means an *introductory* "introduction." On the contrary, it is a highly technical work. Although Barbaras occasionally pauses to gather his thoughts, he develops his analyses very swiftly, and in a terse and severely humourless style that is not for the uninitiated. The work was originally published in Vrin's *Problèmes et Controverses* series (1999). That this translation appears in SUP's *Cultural Memory* in the *Present* series is a bit perplexing, its content being far removed from anything that could be deemed "cultural analysis" in even the most generous sense. (There is no introduction from either the series editor or the translator that might clarify its inclusion in this series.) Be that as it may, *Desire and Distance* is a pivotal work of an important contemporary thinker, and its availability in English should give a welcome boost to discussions of foundational phenomenological theory.

Barbaras begins with what Merleau-Ponty called "the basic fact of metaphysics," that "I am sure that there is being—on the condition that I do not seek another sort of being than being-for-me." Accepting that our access to transcendence necessarily passes through immanence commits one to a broadly phenomenological approach, the primary task of which is to reconcile "presence" and "thingness" [*choséité*] in an account of the conditions of their primordial unity. The difficulty is to come to terms with the *distance* that is contained within perceptual experience, to overcome the dichotomies on which most philosophical accounts of perception founder. For Barbaras, this means getting clear about the ontological structure of "appearance" [*l'apparaître*], i.e., the ontology of phenomenality as such. This means avoiding any confusion between appearance in this sense and "appearing" [*l'apparaissant*], whether in general or in the form of any particular "appearance" [*l'apparence*]. (One wishes that the translator had included a note flagging this terminology.) We need to respect the autonomy and originality of phenomenality, from which follows the methodological exigency to suspend the "spontaneous ontology" of the natural attitude, i.e., perform the epoché and phenomenological reduction. It is ultimately this exigency that implies a commitment to phenomenology. Pioneering this route, Husserl made the key discovery, namely, that of givenness by "adumbrations" [*esquisses*, Husserl's *Abschattungen*]. From mere "appearance" [*l'apparence*], this allows us to distinguish "manifestation" [*l'apparition*] as the adumbrated awareness through which things are directly given—yet never wholly, that is, always at a distance. For Barbaras, it is of the essence of perception that things are given through the flux of manifestation, and it is here that the constitutive ambiguity between immanence and transcendence that animates the basic problem is to be found.

The primary phenomenological task is not so much to grasp perception along these lines but to retool philosophy by thinking according

to [*selon*] perception. This is something that Husserl himself failed to do. He compromised his insight concerning adumbrational givenness by retaining a dualistic conceptual framework according to which "the appearance of worldly appearing" [*l'apparaître de l'apparaissant mondain*] refers phenomenality back to a sense of immanent lived experience—transcendental consciousness—that would be an Archimedean point outside of the essential distance and ambiguity of perception. This phenomenologically unwarranted "subjectivation" of appearance [*l'apparaître*] is tied to traditional objectivist assumptions concerning presence and the determinability of being. The root of the problem lies in Husserl's positivist bias, that is, his refusal to recognize the absence from manifestation of what is manifested through adumbration as itself a constitutive moment of phenomenality—in other words, his inability to conceive of absence as a positive mode of perceptual givenness. According to Barbaras, Husserl was thus unfaithful to the reduction in such a way that he falsified his insights, ultimately remaining, despite himself, within the natural attitude.

Barbaras thus aims to redeem Husserl's basic insights and provide a phenomenologically consistent eidetic of perception. Fundamental to this is a rethinking of the natural attitude and hence of the reduction, and this is of particular interest. Key here is the notion of "nothingness" [*le néant*]. Barbaras' contention is that what underlies the naivete of Husserlian positivism is a reversal of the ontological priority of being and nothingness, that is, the supposition that nothing can precede something. What needs to be initially bracketed out is not the thesis of worldly existence but that of a preliminary [*préalable*] nothingness. Rather than moving from a suspension of existence to transcendental subjectivity, the reduction properly leads from the negation of nothingness to phenomenality itself, without any interposed objectivity. This fulfills the true motive of the reduction, which is not to place in abeyance the existence of the world but to overcome the misleading pre-comprehension that obstructs the correct apprehension of that existence.

Rather than transcendental consciousness, then, the apodictic residuum of this approach is the certainty of an originary "there is" [*il y a*] which discloses "the structure of belonging [*appartenance*]" that is constitutive of appearance [*l'apparaître*]." It is as "belonging" that Barbaras characterizes the "originary and perfectly singular mode of solidarity" that is the mutual implication of world, horizon, and subject—the *what*, *how*, and *to whom* of appearance. The claim that this solidarity yields the essence of appearance is meant to turn Husserl on his head by dispossessing consciousness of its priority: rather than the world being conditioned a priori by consciousness, it is now seen as the latter's a priori condition. There is thus no horizon of adequate deter-

mination. Rather, appearance implies the presence of the unrepresentable: all manifestation is "co-manifestation" of the world, of its inexhaustible absence, such that obscurity is spread across all experience. The structure of appearance thus breaks the laws of formal ontology, which hold only for appearing. In particular, the horizontality of the infinite flow of adumbrational givenness defies the principle of identity. This also applies to the subject. While subjectivity is an integral part of the structure of appearance, it is nonetheless ontologically dependent on the logic of appearance.

Barbaras thus provides a pointed and largely compelling critique and reinterpretation of transcendental phenomenology, a view informed and inspired primarily by the thought of Jan Patocka. Some may feel that the "standard" view of Husserl that Barbaras targets is a caricature. But the nature of his position, which aims to radicalize phenomenology or to out-Husserl Husserl, can effectively dodge that sort of objection. The deeper problem has to do with Barbaras' embrace of the infinite flow of adumbration as ontologically constitutive rather than, with Husserl, as an epistemologically regulative idea in the Kantian sense. While he rejects the intuitional basis of phenomenology, inasmuch as intuition is inevitably intertwined with the non-intuitive, Barbaras does not call into question the primacy of givenness. He thus argues for the givenness of the impossibility of something's being exhaustively given: "The fact that the object cannot be given to me itself from the moment that, as an object in the world, it envelops the infinite *is itself given to me*" (76). This is a crucial plank in his effort to go beyond Husserl. Phenomenologically, however, it is highly dubious, and in any case does not seem to follow from the originary « *il y a* » as Barbaras described it. It is not that the latter is inconsistent with infiniteness per se. Rather, the problem is that Barbaras ties infiniteness to a notion of "*the world*" that presupposes that a *single* world—Husserl's *die eine Welt*—actually obtains. But this shows that Barbaras is insufficiently radical. Although he sets aside assumptions about its knowability, he does not recognize that the correct apprehension of the existence of *the world* will be rooted in the possibility that that singularity does *not* obtain, and that if it is given at all then it is as a practical imperative to realize. In effect, Barbaras pushes to the limit the standpoint of what Fink called the "non-participant spectator," and his claim about the givenness of the infinite is merely a speculative way to redeem phenomenology as a project of strictly theoretical reason.

In the last two chapters, Barbaras works back from this account of phenomenality to consider in more detail the question of the perceptual subject, approaching this as that which makes possible the presence of the unrepresentability of the world. Here he is critical of Merleau-Ponty, the

shortcomings of whose work can be traced back to his beginning with embodiment rather than interrogating the latter's inscription in the world on the basis of the horizontal structure of appearance and the negativity or non-coincidence that this implies. It is thus not corporeality as such that is basic but its "constitutive motility," living movement as "the realized identity between being and appearance" (92). Here Barbaras appeals to the likes of Kurt Goldstein and Viktor Von Weizsäcker, although this seems to be at odds with the specific phenomenological rigor that he has tried to establish. At any rate, readers of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's *The Primacy of Movement* will find Barbaras' discussion agreeable, if very cursory.

For Barbaras, the ultimate sense of perceptual subjectivity as living movement is cashed out as desire, "an originary incompleteness" understood in terms of "the movement of life itself," that is, the dimension of life transcendently prior to the distinction between transitive and intransitive living. This is life as "the constitutive arch-facticity [*archi-facticité*] of the transcendental, the mutual envelopment of the world and its condition of phenomenalization" (114). Barbaras argues that it is as desire alone, understood as desire for the world, that the sense of being of the perceptual subject can account for the double dimensionality of manifestation, i.e., the solidarity of presence and absence: "To say that perception is desire is to say that every being appears only as the manifestation [*manifestation*] of an ultimate appearing that itself never appears" (125).

This is certainly interesting, and it would have far-reaching epistemological and ontological consequences, but it is simply an attempt to work out the conditions of possibility of the account of appearance developed in the first part of the book. It stands or falls with that account which, as noted, is not unproblematic. There is a naivete there which gets reflected in the story of desire. For it is unclear whether the constitutive incompleteness of desire points to *the* world or just to a *particular* lifeworld [*Lebenswelt*], what Husserl called a "homeworld" [*Heimwelt*]. Contrary to the publisher's blurb, there is no discussion of lifeworld in the text. It may be, as Barbaras suggested at the end of *De l'être du phénomène*, that the lifeworld is all there is. Yet surely what is given is a concrete multiplicity of lifeworlds. This makes it hard to see how disinterested philosophical insight could emerge on a phenomenological basis. For to treat the lifeworld as a singular universal would presuppose some kind of biological monism; yet in the absence of a universal frame of reference, description is left to choose among so many socio-historical regimes of visibility.

Barbaras' insistence on the givenness of the infinite's non-givenness is meant to avoid this predicament. But as he seems to recognize in his

Afterword, which is a welcome addition to the English translation, this may not actually provide a phenomenological solution. Here, still with Patocka in mind, he presses the possibility that the ultimate realization of phenomenology would take the form paradoxically of a cosmology, or a "cosmobiology," as if "we abandoned phenomenology at the very moment in which we succeeded in establishing its possibility" (150). To his credit, Barbaras ends on an incisive and stimulating note of self-interrogation. But it may well be that the prospect of running aground in this way stems less from phenomenology per se and more from the "non-participant" approach that Barbaras has adopted. For the sake of the project, then, the range of questions that we need to ask should thus be expanded: Can a phenomenology of life culminate in disinterested theoretical judgments? Does "perceptual faith" not confer an indelible normative horizon? Does phenomenology not show us that the realization of philosophy is, at the end of the day, a matter of *practical* reason?

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On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy

JACQUES DERRIDA

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The English translation of Derrida's *Le Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000) is a welcome revitalization of a subject that evoked much interdisciplinary attention two to three decades ago. In a text that tempts us back to the body, but with a difference, Derrida offers a characteristically tentative yet searching engagement with the works of his friend and philosophical ally, Jean-Luc Nancy. It is one of Derrida's most ambitious and demanding texts perhaps since *The Politics of Friendship* (1997), for he not only traces the thematic surfacing of touch in Nancy's writings but also regards the esteemed thinker in relation to a history of philosophy of touch, from Plato and Aristotle to theologian Jean-Louis Chrétien. The implicit and explicit dialogues between philosophers who have addressed touch inform Derrida's celebration of Nancy's works such as *A Finite Thinking*, *The Experience of Freedom*, *Being Singular Plural*, *L'intrus*, *The Experience of Freedom*, and *Corpus*. Following Derrida's foreword, three sections of chapters loosely structure the readings: "This is—of the other," "Tangents/Exemplary Stories of the Flesh," and "Punctuations: 'And You.'" Each section follows the haptical in various thinkers while