The idea of phenomenology has a quite long history, going back at least to the 17th century (Spiegelberg 1981, 7; Schuhmann 1984). A decisive turning point, however, occurs at the end of the 19th century. No longer a particular branch or a part—though important—of philosophy in general (as still in Lambert, Herder, Kant and even Hegel), phenomenology has now the ambition to renew philosophy as a whole and modify the very way in which philosophy deals with its most fundamental questions. Brentano’s “descriptive”, Husserl’s “transcendental”, Heidegger’s “hermeneutical” phenomenology and their offspring, all share—despite major differences—the same ambition.

Each of these projects, however, rests on a distinctive concept of “phenomenon”, determining the meaning, scope and resources of its corresponding form of phenomenology. Charting such concepts and their relevant varieties is thus of paramount importance to identify, let alone assess, both similarities and differences among philosophical projects variously called “phenomenology”.

30.1. Phenomenology of true phenomena: Brentano

One of the main claims of Brentano’s Psychology from an empirical standpoint (1874) is that “descriptive psychology” is not just an empirical science among others. Because of its higher theoretical (Brentano 1874, 29/15), practical (Brentano 1874, 30/15) and metaphysical value (Brentano 1874, 37/19), psychology is, in fact, superior to and more fundamental than any other science.

Yet this superiority is not in the least self-evident. For its scientific character is not secured from the outset. Kant, for instance, claimed that psychology is neither a rational “science of the soul” (for this would entail all sorts of paralogisms) nor an empirical “science of the phenomena of the internal sense” (for being temporal and having no spatial dimension, the latter cannot be observed and measured) (Brentano 1874, 94/49). Brentano responds to Kant by making three claims:

(i) psychology (as opposed to natural science) is not the science of the soul (as opposed to the science of bodies), but of psychic phenomena (as opposed to the science of physical phenomena), whose main distinctive feature is the so-called “intentional in-existence” (Brentano 1874, 124–125/68);
Phenomenon

(ii) both phenomena (psychic and physical) are empirically given, each having its own form of perception; as a result, natural sciences are ultimately grounded on the experience of “outer” perception, while psychology is grounded on “inner” perception;

(iii) however, only phenomena given to “inner” perception are truly perceived, whereas phenomena given to “outer” perception do not appear as they actually are (Brentano 1874, 28–29/14–15).

If (i) and (ii) show that psychology is “epistemologically” equal to natural science, (iii) points already towards its “theoretical” superiority. Psychology is in fact the unique science based on the only perception in the strict sense of the word” (Wahr-nehmung) (Brentano 1874, 128/70). Unlike physical phenomena, psychic phenomena are perceived not as “signs” (Zeichen) of something whose actual being is unapparent, but as manifestations of something that truly is (Majolino 2008, 165–170). Thus, strictly speaking, only psychic phenomena are phenomena in the true sense, i.e. they truly are as they appear to be, and they appear to be as they truly are.

Quite consistently, in his 1888/89 Vienna lectures, Brentano suggests calling the science of psychic phenomena “descriptive phenomenology” (deskriptive oder beschreibende Phänomenologie). In fact, if “to be a phenomenon, something must exist in itself”; if “phenomenon” names something that “is perceived by us in the strict sense of the word” (i.e. something for which the principle holds that appearance = existence); and if this “is not the case for the external world”—then “only psychic realities are phenomena in this strict sense” (Brentano 1888/89, 129/137). Accordingly, only psychology, i.e. the science dealing with phenomena in the true sense, deserves to be called “phenomenology”.

According to Brentano then—and pace Kant—psychology is indeed an empirical science. Moreover, qua “phenomenology”, it is the only science of phenomena in the strict sense, i.e. the only science of something whose existence is tantamount to its appearance and vice-versa. Hence, its theoretical superiority.

30.2. Phenomenology without phenomena? Husserl (I)

In Husserl’s Logical Investigations (1900–1901), “phenomenology” has already a slightly different task. It has to ground pure logic, which, in turn, delivers the essential theoretical foundations for the “theory of science”. This, Husserl continues, can only be achieved thanks to a twofold clarification: (i) of the meaning of logical concepts and laws (Hua XIX/1, 10/168); (ii) of “the essence of clarification itself” (Hua XIX/1, 13/170). This second point leads to the study of consciousness in general, and of conscious acts in which logical meanings are constituted and fulfilled in particular.

Now, Husserl’s project is built on an explicit rejection of Brentano’s account of “phenomena”. More precisely he rejects:

(i) the talk of “phenomena” to describe “lived experiences” (Erlebnisse): “We will neither talk of psychic phenomena nor of phenomena in general”, he writes, for such language “is fraught with the most dangerous ambiguities, and insinuates the quite doubtful persuasion, expressly professed by Brentano, that each intentional experience is a phenomenon” (Hua XIX/1, 384/97), i.e. object of an internal consciousness;

(ii) the distinction between phenomena qua mere signs (existence ≠ appearance) and true phenomena (existence = appearance); for intentional lived experiences (roughly corresponding to Brentano’s psychic phenomena) are not more “phenomenal” or “truly existing” than non-intentional ones;
(iii) the conflation of intentional and immanent objects; for all lived experiences (intentional, non-intentional) are sharply distinguished from their transcendent objective correlates (Hua XIX/1, 411–413/112–113).

By putting all lived experiences on a par (ii), denying their eo ipso phenomenal status (i) and emphasizing the transcendence of intentional objects (iii), Husserl dismisses the key tenets of Brentano’s phenomenology.

What is phenomenology then? And what does “phenomenon” mean?

Though still dealing with Erlebnisse in general (and intentional Erlebnisse in particular) (Hua XIX/1, 411/112), phenomenology is no longer the “factually descriptive” investigation of actually existing lived experiences. It is rather, Husserl says, a “purely descriptive” enterprise (Hua XIX/1, 24/177). Why purely descriptive? Because its descriptions refer to something that is indifferent to factual existence, to the “here and now” of the lived experiences described (Hua XIX/1, 114/240). What “pure” descriptions describe are “instances” (Einzelfälle) or “arbitrary examples” of ideal lived experiences, “to be grasped through them” (Hua XIX/1, 114/240).

It is precisely because the phenomenology of the Logical Investigations is—ante litteram—“eidetic”, i.e. indifferent to factual existence, that it can precede and ground not only logic but also theoretical philosophy, including all empirical sciences and even metaphysics (Hua XIX/1, 26–27/178). Thus, when it comes to “phenomena”, one has not to decide about or rest upon the distinction between what truly exists and what not.

Hence, although Brentano’s phenomenon is what appears as it truly is, something whose existence is tantamount to its appearance, Husserl’s is rather what appears beyond existence and non-existence, something whose existence is indifferent with respect to its appearance. Admittedly, both phenomena, Brentano’s and Husserl’s, are meant to ground theoretical sciences and philosophy in general—yet their corresponding “phenomenologies” couldn’t be more different.

### 30.3. Phenomenology of correlative phenomena: Husserl (II)

In the Idea of Phenomenology (1907), the task of phenomenology appears already to be wider than in the Logical Investigations. No longer limited to the foundation of logic and, ultimately, theoretical philosophy, phenomenology’s new task is to carry out a “critique of reason” in all its forms: theoretical, practical and axiological (Hua II, 52/39–40).

Such wider scope implies a profound modification in Husserl’s concept of “phenomenon”; a modification related to the introduction of two key concepts: the “phenomenological reduction” and the idea of “constitutive correlation”.

The “reduction” is introduced through the so-called “riddle of transcendence” (Hua II, 43/33). “Immanence” and “transcendence”, Husserl says, are ambiguous terms. Among its manifold meanings, “transcendence” can be used also to refer to something whose givenness is not absolutely evident—i.e. an object whose knowledge cannot exclude doubt as for its being (“there is x”) or being-so (“x is A”). But “how can knowledge posit as existing something that is not directly and genuinely given in it”? (Hua II, 35/27–8).

Such “riddle” cannot be solved within what Husserl calls the “natural attitude”. For the latter is characterized precisely by the fact of positing the existence of objects for which doubt is not excluded, beginning with the world (Hua II, 17/15). Everything in the world can be doubted—at least in principle.

Following Descartes, one should therefore suspend the validity of the world (Hua II, 29/23) and search for a knowledge that does not suffer of the lack of evidence proper to transcendence. Unlike Descartes, however, one should neither truly doubt about the existence
of the world, nor conflate “immanence” intended as absolute evidence with another meaning of “immanence”, i.e. the real (reell) presence of a lived experience within the stream of consciousness (cogitationes).

The “phenomenological reduction”, as it were, follows Descartes’s lead in a non-Cartesian way. By “bracketing” the position of existence proper to the natural attitude, it unfolds the difference between a “pure phenomenon in the phenomenological sense” and a merely “psychological” one (Hua II, 45/34). Whereas the latter—i.e. the object of psychology as empirical science—is still a worldly fact, the former is nowhere to be found in the world; and while psychological phenomena are as doubtful as any other “transcendent” being, only phenomena “in the phenomenological sense” appear as given beyond any doubt (Hua II, 43/33).

Husserl’s use of the word “phenomenon” here has thus two distinctive features:

(i) its meaning is equivocal, for all “phenomena” are not “phenomena in the sense of phenomenology”;

(ii) its object is somehow ambiguous, for the difference between “phenomena” (in the sense of phenomenology or not) depends on the way in which they are “seen”: in the “natural” or in the “phenomenological” attitude; by embracing transcendence or bracketing it etc.

But a second equivocity is nested within the first, showing the actual scope of the domain of absolute givenness reached in the phenomenological attitude.

(iii) “The meaning of the word ‘phenomenon’ (Phänomen)—Husserl writes— “is twofold because of the essential correlation between appearing (Erscheinen) and that which appears (Erscheinendem)”; accordingly, “the phenomenology of knowledge is a science of the phenomenon of knowledge in a twofold sense: of (acts of) knowledge as appearances (…) [and] of the objectivities themselves as objects that present themselves in just such ways” (Hua II, 14/69);

(iv) finally, what is also given absolutely in the phenomenological attitude are the essential forms of such constitutive correlations, granting for the scientific status of phenomenology (eidetic science vs. factual science) and its method (intuitive-descriptive vs. formal or exact) (Hua II, 47/36).

In (i) and (ii), the reduction tells us that what is “absolutely given” is not a “factual phenomenon” but a “phenomenon in the sense of phenomenology”; in (iii) the idea of constitutive correlation explains that the latter is a unity of sense constituted by a multiplicity of intentional/non-intentional conscious lived experiences (see Majolino 2012, 155–182); something that can be investigated in its essential structures and forms by a fully fledged eidetic science called “phenomenology”, as in (iv).

The whole pattern could be summarized by the diagram sketched in the following page (Figure 30.1).

Thanks to this refined understanding of phenomena, Husserl is now able to solve the “riddle” of transcendence. Phenomenology is now the eidetic science of phenomena in a “phenomenological sense”, i.e. constitutive correlations of consciousness (appearing/that which appears) accessible thanks to the phenomenological reduction. Since the latter are given absolutely and could be described eidetically, phenomenology can also fulfill the task of grounding the whole of philosophy (theoretical, practical and axiological). And it can do so by fixing the boundaries of its inner object domains and corresponding methods, clarifying the various ways in which any consciousness as intentional consciousness comes to constitute the sense of beings, goals and values.
A further development occurs in Ideas I (1913), where phenomenology is defined as “the eidetic doctrine, not of phenomena that are real, but of phenomena that are transcendentally reduced” (Hua III/1, 6/xx). This definition introduces a further sophistication, a new problem, and a radical modification within Husserl’s previous account of “phenomenon”.

The sophistication results from the refinement of the technique of reduction, adding to the phenomenological reduction, spelled out in the Idea of Phenomenology, a series of “transcendental reductions” (Hua III/1, 69/66), whose main task is to guarantee the radical independence of the Urregion (Hua III/1, 159/171) “transcendental consciousness”. Thus, in addition to the transcendence of the factual world, one should also reduce the transcendence of God, the eidetic domain of pure logic and all formal and material ontologies in order to avoid any risk of “meta-basis” (Hua III/1, 130/139). The phenomenon of phenomenology is now “transcendentally” reduced insofar as it appears at the end of the series of reductions, whereas all domains of existence with which it could be confused and mistaken are carefully excluded.

This new transcendental dimension goes hand in hand with the appearance of a new problem, related to the concept of “ontological region” and revolving around the formal ontological notion of “individual”. The new problem is that of the unity of the world in the diversity of its regions, nature and spirit (Majolino 2015, 33–50). Such unity cannot be granted ontologically, as if the world were itself a sort of “super region” including all sorts of entities, ultimately traced back, by means of some logical variation (part–all, particular–universal, matter–form) to certain paradigmatic individuals. The problem of the “whole of the world” (Weltall) can only be soundly addressed as that of a transcendental unity, as a transcendent phenomenon correlative constituting in its own specific sense of being (as Wirklichkeit, Realität) (Hua III/1, 159/171). The unity of the world is thus rooted in the principles of transcendental phenomenology grounding, in their sense of being and being-such, the whole of eidetic—material and formal—and empirical sciences (Hua III/1, 159/171).

Finally, a modification in the concept of phenomenon occurs with respect to its “metaphysical” character. The transcendental account of phenomenology in Ideas I is, in fact, inseparable from the idea that the mode of being of pure consciousness is in principle distinct from that of the world. Husserl is now explicitly addressing—though with entirely new means and after having previously excluded it—Brentano’s problem of the true phenomenon (see Section 30.1 above). Thus, unlike the Logical Investigations and the Idea of Phenomenology, Ideas I presents phenomenology as the true eidetic science of what is originally and absolutely given, not only with respect to its essence, but also with respect to its existence (Hua III/1, 97/101), i.e. the only science of “phenomena” for which appearance is tantamount to existence, as opposed to the “phenomena” of the natural attitude, which could be otherwise as they appear, and even could not be at all (Hua III/1, 97/101).
30.5. Phenomenology, phenomena and the “realism” of essences: Reinach

Reacting to Ideas I, Adolf Reinach’s account of “phenomenon” in Concerning Phenomenology (1914) bears undeniable similarities with Husserl’s Logical Investigations. Such similarities, however, should not prevent us from acknowledging its undisputable originality.

Reinach presents phenomenology as “a method of philosophizing which is required by the problems of philosophy” (Reinach 1914, 531/2, 546/24) to provide the foundations of positive sciences (Reinach 1914, 549/29). By “method”, however, one should neither understand a “practical” course of action (Reinach 1914, 535/8), nor a deductive “system of philosophical propositions and truths” (Reinach 1914, 531/2). The phenomenological method is rather “a way of seeing” that “allows us to see what was, indeed, there already, but without our being conscious of it” (Reinach 1914, 532/3) and to do so in “an ultimate and absolute evidence” (Reinach 1914, 545-546/24). It is meant to bring us, beyond any “theories and constructions” (Reinach 1914, 550/30), to the “things themselves” with which “we are always dealing with, right from the beginning”, thus “overcoming” the “natural distance from objects” (Reinach 1914, 532/4).

But what are the “things themselves” that phenomenology aims at bringing us closer to?

According to Reinach they are the “what” (Was) (Reinach 1914, 532/3, 535/8, 536/9), i.e. the “essences” (Washeiten, Wesen) (Reinach 1914, 542-543/19-20) of objects. Thus, by changing one’s attitude, it is possible to shift from existence to essence (Reinach 1914, 533/5, 534/6), from “the individual experience” which “refers, as sense perception, to the singular, to the ‘that-right-there’ (Diesda)” to “intuitive acts of a wholly different sort” grasping general and non-contingent objects for which “no sense perception is required” (Reinach 1914, 543/20). For the latter, “pure imagination suffices” (Reinach 1914, 543/20), for the “viewing and knowing of essences” is not bound to actual existence.

This holds for the essence “consciousness” (grasped in a non-psychological way) (Reinach 1914, 547/25-26), but also for “numbers” (Reinach 1914, 538-541/13-18) or “nature” (Reinach 1914, 549/28). In short, it holds for all “phenomena”, i.e. for everything that, in the phenomenological attitude, is grasped “purely”, indifferently to its existence, only as a possible arbitrary example. And this happens whenever we work out “its essence without preconceptions and pre-judgments”. Thus, there will be as many phenomenologies as eidetic sciences, i.e. sciences following the phenomenological method: a “theory of psychological essences” founding “empirical psychology”, a theory of physical essences founding empirical physics etc. (Reinach 1914, 548/27).

Reinach’s “phenomenology” rests on three conceptual decisions:

(i) it rejects its status as a science, and limits itself to a merely methodological function (phenomenology = eidetic reduction);
(ii) it explicitly equates “phenomenon” and “arbitrary example of an essence”;
(iii) it characterizes the phenomenological–eidetic attitude as opposed to the natural–factual attitude.

Because of (i) and (iii), Reinach’s “phenomenology” differs from psychology, precisely because of its eidetic character. However, because of (ii), it also differs from Husserl’s Logical Investigations, for it openly widens the object domain to which the concept of “phenomenon” applies: not just to (pure) Erlebnisse, but to every object to be grasped in their essence.

Moreover, Reinach is also able to reorganize philosophy by simplifying its plan: empirical sciences are grounded on eidetic sciences (operating phenomenologically). There is no need for a “fundamental science”, be it Brentano’s descriptive phenomenology or Husserl’s phenomenology as eidetic psychology or his constitutive-transcendental phenomenology.
This finally leads to Reinach’s critique of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. If “phenomenon” simply means “arbitrary example of an essence”, the only “phenomenological reduction” needed is the eidetic one, i.e. the one directed towards essences; essences being “real” in the sense that they are what they are independently of our thoughts and knowledge, but also of any empirical contingency. Thus, if no transcendental reduction is required, phenomenology is *eo ipso* “realist phenomenology”.

### 30.6. Genetic phenomenology of phenomena “in an absolutely unique sense”: Husserl (IV)

The genetic “turn” of phenomenology, especially in the *Cartesian Meditations* (1927), somehow diffraacts the account of “phenomenon” pictured so far.

Husserl remarks that the reduction brings us in front of “phenomena in the sense of phenomenology” that still present the world with all the familiar structures encountered in the natural attitude (things, living bodies, persons, communities, cultural objects, etc.) (Hua I, 109–111/75–77). The appearance of such structures, however, is not constituted in one blow. It is rather the results of a complex intentional history (of receptivity, constitution of the field of passive pre-donation, habituality, active synthesis, etc.). Phenomenology should thus be able to describe the eidetic laws of the *historical constitution of such structures in any possible world and their parallel forms of correlation*.

As a result, the phenomenological attitude is now diffracted in two directions: static and genetic. The latter deals with the eidetic laws of the historical constitution of any possible world and world structures; the former classifies systematically, clarifies and tests the eidetic laws thanks to which objects, having already been historically constituted, are identified and re-identified (Hua I, 110/76). The concept of “phenomenon” thus undergoes a parallel diffraction: understood genetically, phenomena now embed a historical-constitutive dimension.

Moreover, in the *Krisis* (1935–1936) Husserl makes a distinctive use of the concept of phenomenon understood genetically, and provides some remarks as to its historical origin and critical role.

In “Galileo’s mathematizing reinterpretation of nature”, Husserl says, “phenomena are only in the subjects; they are there only as causal results of events taking place in true nature, which events exist only with mathematical properties” (Hua VI, 54/53–54). Thinking nature as something that is objectively mathematical in its “true being-in-itself” is thus related to a *merely subjective* account of “phenomena”. Here lies one of the roots of the crisis. Rejecting “phenomena” as merely subjective with respect to the rational objectivity of mathematized nature is tantamount to ignoring that reason is the subjective correlate of being and truth. And this prevents European sciences from addressing the problems related to mathematical substruction, as the apparently unbridgeable gap between the *world in itself* (non-phenomenal) and the *world-in-which-we-live* (phenomenal).

Transcendental philosophy, by contrast, deals with a concept of “phenomenon” having “a quite peculiar sense”, a *new concept of ‘phenomenon’, arising the first time—although still insufficiently spelled out—with the Cartesian epoché* (Hua VI, 155/152). Such new concept is neither to be understood in an empirical naïve sense (as a pre-given fact) nor in a rationalistic sense (as a merely subjective event), but rather in a genetic-constitutive sense. In the transcendental reduction—where “being” is bracketed—the world does not appear as “pre-given” or as “already there” but, precisely, as *constantly unfolding itself*, constituted in the “subjectivity as pregiving the world” (Hua VI, 150/147).

Only a philosophy grounded phenomenologically—i.e. on the basis of a genetic understanding of that “transcendental” concept of phenomenon, first introduced by Descartes, as opposed
30.7. Phenomenology of the world as transcendental phenomenon: Fink

On phenomenology (1933) and What does Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology want? (1934), are two essays in which Eugen Fink introduces a novel concept of phenomenon.

According to Fink, Husserl's phenomenology is characterized by a twofold opposition. On the one hand, it is opposed to “the naivety of daily epistemic praxis and positive scientific research” (because of its blindness to the problem of the possibility of knowledge) (Fink 1966, 95); on the other, it differs from criticism (for, although aware of the problem of knowledge, it tries to solve it thanks to the relation between transcendental apperception and “apriori form of the world” (Fink 1966, 100).

In fact, despite their differences, both positions occur within the “natural attitude”, i.e. they share the same “belief in the reality of the world” (Fink 1966, 114), where all entities that we refer to exist only on the basis of the “non-thematized foundation” (Fink 1966, 117) of the world. As a result, the fundamental problem of “the origin of the world” (Fink 1966, 101) or of “the being of the world” (Fink 1966, 116, 119) remains unnoticed.

Thanks to the transcendental reduction, Husserl’s phenomenology delivers us from our status of “prisoners of the world” (Fink 1966, 111, 179) and turns the world itself into something “questionable as such” (Fink 1966, 123); into a “phenomenon”.

Fink’s concept of “phenomenon” now extends to the following two correlated meanings:

(i) the world—understood not as in the distinction between phenomenon and thing-in-itself, but as “being-for-the-transcendental-subjectivity-of-the-world” (Fink 1966, 128), i.e. as the “transcendental phenomenon of the world” (Fink 1966, 118);

(ii) transcendental life itself (Fink 1966, 126)—understood as the “origin of the world”, as the “original-phenomenon” (Ur-phänomen) in which the being of the world is constituted (Fink 1966, 168).

The phenomenology inaugurated by Husserl is therefore a science in an entirely new sense: more fundamental than any naïve science of the world (Fink 1966, 103–105); but also more radical than criticist philosophy, grounded on “the opposition between world and representation” (Fink 1966, 127).

Now, though literally in agreement with the late Husserl’s views, Fink’s specific understanding of the concept of “phenomenon” is nevertheless quite original; for the concepts of “constitution” and “reduction”, essential to Husserl’s account of phenomena, appear to be fully reinterpreted.

To begin with, Husserl’s “constitution” as synthetic “unity of multiplicity” is recast in terms of a transcendental creation. Such peculiar shift is made possible, on the one hand, by collapsing Kant’s “phenomenon” (as the psychological receptive correlate of the intuitus derivatus) and Husserl’s (for in the natural attitude, the psychological noema is “the sense of experience in which the object existing in itself is in itself accessible through some infinite relativity in the course of the fulfilling identification”) (Fink 1966, 132–133); on the other, by overcoming the latter into a “transcendental phenomenon”, i.e. “the world itself”, “being itself (…) in the innermost and still unknown depths of its hidden sense of being” (Fink 1966, 133), as the correlate of a creation (Fink 1966, 143) understood on the basis of the Kantian model of the intuitus originarius.
As for the concept of the transcendental “reduction”, it undergoes an even deeper modification. By bracketing the position of existence of the world and turning it into a question of sense-constitution, Husserl’s reduction accedes to the transcendental field and, at the same time, quits the field of facts, leaving aside—at least preliminarily—all metaphysical issues, including the one of the creation of the factual world. Accordingly, Husserl’s reduction opens the phenomenological problem of the origin of the world, by shifting from the question of its being to the question of its sense; Fink’s reduction, by contrast, addresses right away the metaphysical problem of the origin of the world, by shifting from the question of its being received, to the question of its being created by a subject.

30.8. Hermeneutic phenomenology and the exceptional phenomenon of being: Heidegger

Heidegger’s account of “phenomenon” in §7 of Being and Time (1927) represents a decisive moment in the history of phenomenology.

Having reminded us that the question of Being is “the fundamental question of philosophy in general”, Heidegger asks about the method of ontology. Unlike “historically transmitted ontologies” (Heidegger 1927, 27/24), he adds, such method needs to be drawn “from the objective necessity of particular issues and procedures asked by the ‘things themselves’” (Heidegger 1927, 27/24).

Thus, “phenomenology” is not the name of a science (the science of phenomena), i.e. a discipline defined by its “what” (Was). It is precisely a method, and has to do with the “how” (Wie), i.e. the way in which things show themselves. Hence the phenomenological maxim “to the things themselves!”, “opposed to free-floating constructions and accidental findings; it is also opposed to taking over any conceptions which only seem to have been demonstrated; and likewise to pseudo-questions which are often spread abroad as ‘problems for generations’” (Heidegger 1927, 27–28/24). Any science carrying out its quest following such maxim follows a “phenomenological” method—and this also applies to ontology.

Yet ontology is unlike any other “science”, and its bond to phenomenology appears to be more intimate. Consequently, in order to refine this preliminary understanding of “phenomenology”, Heidegger turns to the original meaning of the formal concepts of “phenomenon” and “logos” (Heidegger 1927, 28/24).

Though the word “phenomenon” (Phänomen) has different meanings—for it can be understood as “semblance” (Schein), “appearance” (Erscheinung), “mere appearance” (bloße Erscheinung), etc.—such “confusing multiplicity” (Heidegger 1927, 31/27), Heidegger says, can be traced back to one “original” (Heidegger 1927, 29/25) or “basic” meaning (Heidegger 1927, 32/28): “what shows itself, the self-showing, the manifest” (Heidegger 1927, 28/25). As for the concept of “logos”, it originally means to “make manifest ‘what is being talked about’ in speech” (Heidegger 1927, 32/28). Putting together the two concepts, one finally gets what Heidegger calls the formal pre-concept of phenomenology: “apophainesthai ta phainomena: to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger 1927, 34/30).

Such original concept of phenomenology, however, is still “merely formal”, for it leaves undetermined whether “that which shows itself” is Being or an entity (Heidegger 1927, 31/27). As long as the pre-concepts of (i) “phenomenon” and (ii) “logos” are not deformalized according to the ontological difference, the uniqueness of ontology remains undecided.

(i) The deformalization of the formal pre-concept of “phenomenon” happens in two ways: either by an entity, i.e. something that “initially and for the most part” shows itself in the world, right from the outset; or by the self-showing of Being, i.e. something that is not only “initially
and for the most part” but also “essentially” concealed (verborgen). In the first case, we have what Heidegger calls the “vulgar concept of phenomenon” (der vulgäre Phänomenbegriff) (Heidegger 1927, 27/31), shared by all science following the maxim “to the things themselves” as to investigate this or that kind of entity; in the second, we reach the “phenomenological concept of phenomenon” (Phänomenologische Begriff von Phänomen) (Heidegger 1927, 28–31) proper to ontology.

In fact, only a “phenomenon in a distinctive sense” (in einem ausgezeichneten Sinne), concealed in an “exceptional sense” (in einem ausnehmenden Sinne), requires a “phenomenology”, i.e. a method to wrestle from its concealment what essentially does not show itself (Being) and yet is fundamental with respect to the immediate and unproblematic self-showing of worldly entities (Heidegger 1927, 35–36/31).

(ii) As for the deformingalization of the formal pre-concept of “logos”, it is also twofold.

Since the structure of the “falling prey” (Verfallenheit)—characterizing the Dasein in its everydayness—triggers the tendency to understand Being from the standpoint of entities “ready-to-hand” (Heidegger 1927, 21/18–19), “the way of encountering Being and the structures of Being in the mode of phenomena” (Heidegger 1927, 36–37/32) requires a method that is “opposed to the naiveté of an accidental, ‘immediate’ and unreflective ‘beholding’” (Schauen) (Heidegger 1927, 37/32). In other words, neither intuition (Heidegger 1927, 147/138) nor everyday understanding are sufficient to “make manifest ‘what is being talked about’” if the latter is the most exceptional phenomenon of Being.

The only “way of encountering” such phenomenon is by “making explicit” (Auslegung) the articulation of the historically pre-structured meaning from which what is understood is precisely understood as such—what Heidegger calls the “hermeneutical als” (Heidegger 1927, 149/139–140). Thus, in accordance with the ontological primacy of Dasein, such explication has the “philosophically primary meaning” of an analytic of the Dasein (Heidegger 1927, 38/34). But it also has the more general meaning of a “hermeneutics” in the sense that it works out the condition of the possibility of every ontological investigation” (Heidegger 1927, 37–38/33).

By bringing together (i) and (ii), Heidegger finally reveals the necessarily hermeneutical nature of a “phenomeno-logy” focused on the self-showing of the most exceptional phenomenon of all.

Hence, an entirely new concept of “hermeneutical phenomenology”—irreducible to Brentano’s or Husserl’s phenomenologies—comes to the fore: the “explication” of the meaning of Being in general, required by the latter’s essentially concealed character and fundamental role with respect to entities, and primarily grounded on an analytic of the Dasein, as opposed to the “vulgar phenomenology” of all ontic sciences whose phenomena are not exceptional (as they show themselves “initially and for the most part”).

30.9. Varieties of exceptional phenomena: French phenomenology

Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology of exceptional phenomena has been extremely influential.

Though often rejecting the idea of an analytic of the Dasein, the priority of ontology and even the label “hermeneutics”, many—though not all—French phenomenologists have extensively drawn from the idea of a “phenomenological phenomenology” focused on the most exceptional phenomenon of all, i.e. the most concealed and at the same time the most fundamental with respect to everyday phenomena and ordinary objects of science and knowledge.

What Heidegger considered as the only truly phenomenological de-neutralization of the formal pre-concept of phenomenon—i.e. Being—is now emptied of its content, as it were, and somehow re-neutralised as to allow new varieties of more exceptional “phenomenological” phe-
nomena. Emmanuel Levinas, Henry Michel and Jean-Luc Marion are examples of such trend (for further details see Djian-Majolino 2018 and Djian 2018).

30.9.1. The exceptional phenomenon of the Other: Levinas

At least at first sight, Totality and Infinity (1961) seems to openly reject Heidegger's account of phenomenon.

According to Levinas, the “ontological imperialism” dominating Western philosophy (Levinas 1961, 6/21) cannot but understand the encounter with “the Other” (Autre) from within the model of totality, i.e. as someone who is considered as “another self” (un autre moi) rather than as “other than me” (un autre que moi, i.e. Autrui) (Levinas 1961, 9/24). However, in the original face-to-face, the Other manifests itself, breaking the yoke of totality, in the mode of a “revelation” (Levinas 1961, 12/26; 56/62; 61/66) or an “expression” (Levinas 1961, 43/51; 61/65). And the self-showing of a “revelation”, according to Levinas, is precisely the opposite of the self-showing of a “phenomenon”.

In fact, if—following Heidegger’s lead—we call “phenomenon” “the being that appears, but remains absent” (Levinas 1961, 197/181), the Other is rather “he who signals himself by a sign qua signifying that sign (…), delivers the sign and gives it” (Levinas 1961, 92/92). Differently put, the Other “is not, with respect to the phenomenon, the hidden” (Levinas 1961, 198/181), but rather “the principle of phenomena” (Levinas 1961, 92/92), and its “expression” in the word is the fundament of the phenomenon itself. The Other, Levinas says, is the one who “manifests itself in speech by speaking of the world and not of himself; he manifests himself by proposing the world, by thematizing it” (Levinas 1961, 98/96).

So Levinas’s “expression” is literally meant to overcome Heidegger’s “phenomenon”, just as his “ethics” aims at challenging the role of “ontology” qua “first philosophy”. However, despite such explicit opposition, the “expression” of the Other displays all the structural features distinctive of Heidegger’s most exceptional phenomenon of all.

(i) The Other is (initially and for the most part) essentially concealed. Indeed, “the soul (…) is naturally atheist”, and atheism, defined by its egoism, is nothing but “separation” (Levinas 1961, 52/58), i.e. the ordinary relativization of the Other to another self (alter ego). And “the ontology that grasps the being of the existent is a spontaneous and pre-theoretical work of every inhabitant of the earth” (Levinas 1961, 170/158).

(ii) As the principle of the phenomenon, the Other is the original foundation of whatever shows itself, be it the phenomenon as a given sign, or its degraded “appearance” (see “the anarchy of the spectacle” [Levinas 1961, 90–92/90–92]).

(iii) Given (i) and (ii), a philosophy of the Other cannot but be a phenomenology, “to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself”. And such self-showing of what is essentially concealed and the foundation of whatever shows itself happens precisely in the mode of withdrawal: in its “event” or “epiphany” (Levinas 1961, 43/51; 54/60).

Thus, the self-showing of the Other—that-is-not-an-Entity “overflows the thought that thinks it” (Levinas 1990, 10/25), indicating “the essential incompletion of that self-presentation, and (…) the always possible break-up of the 'synthesis' that sums up the sequence of its ‘aspects’” (Levinas 1961, 91/90–91).

Levinas’s self-manifestation of the Other qua revelation/expression thus appears as a variety—though allegedly more fundamental—of Heidegger’s (reformalized) “phenomenological phenomenon”. Accordingly, his “ethics” qua first philosophy could soundly be seen as an alternative...
to the ontology-focused account of “phenomenology” spelled out in Being and Time, and therefore—strange as it might sound—also as a variety of phenomenological hermeneutics (in a reformalized sense).

30.9.2. The exceptional phenomenon of Life: Michel Henry

Michel Henry’s The essence of manifestation (1963) is also presented as a challenge to Heidegger’s ontology.

Confronting the presuppositions of the “ontological monism” which “since its origin in Greece (…) ruled the development of Western philosophical thought” (Henry 1963, 91/74), Henry maintains that the latter has always thought of “the essence of manifestation as origin” in terms of transcendence (Henry 1963, 368/296). This entails a very specific concept of “phenomenon” understood “as something which shows itself within the horizon of light within which all things can become visible” (Henry 1963, 51/40); an horizon, namely Being, which is projected by the Dasein in accordance with its own temporal transcendence.

Such account of the phenomenon, however, is “one-sided”. In fact, there is also another phenomenon, whose mode of manifestation is “irreducible to the ‘how’ of the manifestation of transcendent phenomena” and their horizon (Henry 1963, 51/40). An explicit account of this alternative, non-transcendent phenomenon would finally pave the way for an alternative phenomenology, more fundamental than the phenomenology of the “ontological monism”.

This second “how” is the mode of manifestation proper to immanence, also called “revelation” (Henry 1963, 52/40). Henry’s arguments go as follows: if Being in general manifests itself in the transcendence of Dasein—as indicated in Being and Time—how does such transcendence manifest itself? It cannot be as a transcendence itself (Henry 1963, 258/210; 279/226) for otherwise one would fall into a circle. It has to be a mode of manifestation that is more original than transcendence itself. And this brings us back to a more fundamental concept of phenomenon (Henry 1963, 54/42).

Now, unlike transcendent phenomena, immanent phenomena do not show themselves intuitively as put-at-a-distance within the horizon of the transcendence of the Dasein. They rather show themselves in the self-revelation of the ego to itself (Henry 1963, 279–280/226–227), without distance, affectively immediately, non-intuitively (Henry 1963, 57/44). And this is precisely the immanent affective self-manifestation of the fundamental phenomenon of life, irreducible to and more original than the transcendental hetero-manifestation of worldly and ontological phenomena, proper to the Western tradition.

It is readily apparent that Henry’s account of “phenomenon” is unambiguously opposed to Heidegger’s. Moreover, as Henry puts it, unlike Being in general, which “initially and for the most part” (Henry 1963, 54/42) remains concealed, Life constantly and originally reveals itself (Henry 1963, 54/42–43). The self-manifestation of Life, however, is still a variety of (a suitably reformalized) Heidegger’s “phenomenological phenomenon”.

Though Life reveals itself to itself, Henry also adds that “whatever is most simple and most ‘obvious’, we have long known to be also that which is the most ‘difficult’” (Henry 1963, 55/43). And that which is the simplest, the most obvious and also the most difficult to “let show itself from itself”, notwithstanding its constant self-manifestation, is precisely Life. The ego’s everyday life, Henry repeats at length, continually falls into “the temptation of beings” (Henry 1963, 25/20; 483–484/383–384), so that Life conceals itself (Henry 1963, 479/380). And such “fall” is not accidental. Indeed, being the heterogeneous condition of the manifestation of all transcendence—i.e. of the world and of the worldly beings—Life does not manifest itself worldly or in the world (Henry 1963, 480/380). It is therefore “invisible”.

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Henry’s Life thus displays all the distinctive features of the “most exceptional phenomenon of all”:

(i) though originally and constantly showing itself to itself, because of the tendency of the ego to be absorbed within the transcendence of the world (of Being and entities), Life “initially and for the most part” remains concealed to us;

(ii) the original self-appearance of Life is nevertheless the (immanent) foundation of what ordinarily shows itself (transcendentally) in the world;

(iii) given (i) and (ii), a philosophy of Life cannot but be a phenomenology. Since Life is an immanent phenomenon, both intuition and everyday conceptuality (geared on transcendence) are excluded. Phenomenology’s task is precisely “to bring what it [=Life] spontaneously says of Itself, in the truth of natural language” (Henry 1963, 489/388); to make explicit what Life has always been “saying”, without us being able to “hear” it, because of our commitment to transcendence (Henry 1963, 691/552).

In this sense, not unlike Levinas’s “ethics”, Henry’s project defines an alternative and more fundamental phenomenology than the “ontological” one of Heidegger. Such an alternative is nevertheless a variety of the formal model of “hermeneutical phenomenology” spelled out in *Being and Time*, suitably de-formalized on the basis of a more original variety of “exceptional phenomenon”, i.e. the phenomenon of Life.

### 30.9.3. The exceptional phenomenon of Givenness: Marion

While Levinas and Henry oppose Heidegger’s exceptional “phenomenon” of Being, right from the outset, with the ethical call of the “expression” of the Other and the self-affective “revelation” of Life, J-L. Marion’s *Being Given* (1997) follows an entirely different strategy. Instead of criticizing *Being and Time* §7c, Marion positively draws from Heidegger’s distinction between “being-phenomenon” and “being-concealed”. The first, he says, defines the mode of “what shows itself from itself as pure self-appearing without rest” (Marion 1997, 303/184), “auto-manifestation” (Marion 1997, 359/219). It names the givenness as the foundation of what is given, or the being-given of the given (Marion 1997, 61/35–36), i.e. the “phenomenon” itself (Marion 1997, 197/119). The second, which Marion calls “appearance”, is only a debased form of phenomenon, occurring within the “objectifying representation” (Marion 1997, 22/13; 83/49; 85/50–51), and according to the “privilege of perception and subjectivity (metaphysics)” (Marion 1997, 13/8). In short, while the “phenomenon” shows itself *in itself*, the “appearance” is a phenomenon that shows itself *for us* (Marion 1997, 12/7–8).

Marion’s reference to *Being and Time*, however, includes two distinctive features.

(i) On the one hand, it squarely identifies “phenomenon” and “exceptional phenomenon”. Accordingly, only “saturated phenomena”, characterized by the excess of intuition over intention (the event, the idol, the flesh, the icon, the revelation, etc.), are actually “phenomena”; by contrast, “poor” (essences) and “common” (objects of physics and natural sciences, technical objects) phenomena are only “appearances” (Marion 1997, 22/13).

(ii) On the other, since its Givenness occurs in “the natural attitude” (Marion 1997, 188–189/114), “phenomena” are “initially and for the most part” concealed. Accordingly, their manifestation is ordinarily limited within a “narrow (borné) possibility of phenomenality”, i.e. the one of “finite objectivity” (Marion 1997, 324/196–197).
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The natural attitude’s priority, however, is only “temporal”, not “original”. In other words, as Marion puts it, if phenomena are derivatively limited and bound, originally the Givenness of the phenomenon is unlimited and unbound, i.e. the intuition is in excess with respect to the intention. Hence, one has “to reverse the common definition of the phenomenon” (Marion 1997, 324/197), taking as paradigm not ordinary phenomena (i.e. appearances), but the most extraordinary ones, i.e. the saturated phenomena.

Marion’s Givenness finally appears as a new variety of “phenomenological phenomenon”:

(iii) it is “initially and for the most part” concealed by the limitation of phenomenality within the “natural attitude” or the “objectifying representation”;
(iv) givenness is the foundation of what ordinarily shows itself as “appearance”;
(v) given (iii) and (iv), a philosophy of Givenness cannot but be a phenomenology, “to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself” in a logos that Marion explicitly qualifies as “hermeneutical” (Marion 1997, 187/112).

Marion’s project, however, if compared with the ones spelled out by Levinas or Henry, clearly has an original trait. Having identified from the outset “phenomenon” and “extraordinary phenomenon”—as we have seen in (i)—Marion does not present Givenness merely as another variety of “phenomenological phenomenon”, next to Levinas’s Other and Henry’s Life. He also endows it with a threefold systematic character.

(1) All “poor” and “common” phenomena can be brought together thanks to their common reference to the original concept of Givenness (as the Givenness of a Given that withdraws itself) (Marion 1997, 59–62/34–36); (2) the same holds for “saturated” phenomena, each of which (apart from “revelation”) systematically corresponds to actual varieties of “hermeneutical phenomenologies”: of the event (Ricœur), of the idol (Derrida), of the flesh (Henry), of the icon (Levinas); (3) finally, Givenness appears to be the ultimate “exceptional phenomenon”, the one that, at the same time, overcomes and makes explicit the general architecture of all previous phenomenological projects (Marion 1997, 521/321–322).

As a result, Marion’s account of “phenomenon” somehow turns his phenomenology of Givenness into the ultimate variety of “phenomenological hermeneutics”.

30.10 Two phenomenologies, two phenomena: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty

Sartre’s Being and Nothingness (1943) and Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception (1945) are often presented as parallel projects, having similar goals and comparable scopes. Both providing an original synthesis of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s insights, they oppose phenomenology (based on the notions of intentionality and being-in-the-world) to various forms of naïve realism and psychologizing philosophies inspired by Descartes and Kant. The two projects, however, operate with entirely different concepts of “phenomenon” and, therefore, lead to very different forms of phenomenology.

For Sartre, “phenomenon” names the methodical guiding thread to reach the “trans-phenomenal being” of consciousness (the “for-itself”) and the world (the “in-itself”). More precisely,

(i) thanks to the concept of “phenomenon”, Sartre says, it is finally possible to overcome all dualisms (inner/outer, being/appearing, act/potency, appearance/essence) and trace them back to one single original distinction, i.e. that of the finite and the infinite. In fact, qua “phenomenon”, the existent turns out to be nothing but the infinite series of its finite appearances (Sartre 1943, 11–13/xlv–xlvi);
(ii) on the other hand, if the existent-phenomenon has “its own being” (Sartre 1943, 14/ xlviii), and the actual relation between “phenomenon” and “being” has nothing to do with a Kant-like opposition between “phenomenon” and “thing-in-itself”, one has to conclude that Being itself can manifest itself as a phenomenon. And, here, the phenomenon of Being plays a crucial role to obtain what is at stake in Being and Nothingness, i.e. the Being of the phenomenon. Given (i) and (ii), Sartre’s arguments go as follows: though Being is “the condition of all unveiling” (dévoulement) (Sartre 1943, 15/xlix), as soon as it appears —and “it somehow manifests itself to all of us, since we can speak about it and have some understanding of it” (Sartre 1943, 14/xlxiii)—Being is also unveiled (dévoilé). And it refers, in turn, to the Being of the phenomenon, i.e. the ultimate term of the regression that, as unveiling (dévoilant), is no longer phenomenal, but trans-phenomenal (Sartre 1943, 16/l). Thus, Sartre concludes, the phenomenon of the percipi refers to the being for-itself of consciousness that, as “pure appearance” (Sartre 1943, 23/lvi), manifests itself in a pre-reflexive, non-positional way; as for the being in-itself, as objective reality, it manifests itself in an entirely different way, through the intentional/transcendent character of consciousness (Sartre 1943, 28/lxii). Sartre’s ontology is thus wholly “phenomenological”; for the trans-phenomenal Being of the phenomenon—i.e. the ontological distinction “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself”—is entirely drawn from the methodic role of the phenomenon of Being (Sartre 1943, 33/xlvi–xlvii).

Merleau-Ponty’s account is quite different. Unlike Sartre, his aim is not to distinguish two beings, but rather to “rediscover (retrouver) phenomena” as such (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 84/57). The concept of “phenomenon” thus loses the methodical function it played in Sartre, and turns into the proper object of phenomenology. Correlatively, phenomenology is needed not for the sake of ontology, but because “phenomena”, i.e. our perceptual living relationship to the world, are structurally concealed. The reason of such “concealment” is twofold:

(i) since living un-reflected perception has the function of manifesting the world, it does not manifest itself in the course of its functioning (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 84–85/57);
(ii) within the “natural” or “dogmatic” attitude (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 64/39), our first-personal living experience is not only supplemented but also replaced by a reflexive (i.e. common sense) and cognitive (i.e. science) third-personal objective description (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 82/55).

Consequently, “phenomena” are the terminus ad quem of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological project. Though essentially concealed, they could and should nevertheless be “revived” by a phenomenology which, participating “in the facticity of the un-reflected”, has the ambitious task of dealing with “the appearance of being to consciousness, instead of assuming its possibility as given in advance” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 88/61).

Thus, while Sartre’s account of “phenomenon” leads to the horizontal correlation between being in-itself and for-itself, Merleau-Ponty’s heads instead towards the vertical distinction between an original and a derivative mode of appearance. Accordingly, despite their outward similarities, Sartre’s phenomenological ontology appears to be closer to Husserl’s, whereas Merleau-Ponty’s task of reviving phenomena, bringing to self-showing the essentially concealed fundament of what appears in an objectified manner (i.e. the perception of the world), is manifestly closer to Heidegger’s most “exceptional phenomenon of all”.

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References


