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PHENOMENOLOGY AND STRUCTURALISM

Kwok-ying Lau

70.1. Two senses of structuralism

The term “structuralism” can be understood in two ways. It can mean a method of analysis, that of the structural method, which aims at the search for knowledge and truth specific to the human sciences. But the term “structuralism” can also convey a second meaning that is of ideological and polemical usage: it designates a way of position-taking within the theoretical debates of the French intelligentsia of the 1960s and the 1970s. Under this context, the term “structuralism” is used by theoreticians who define themselves in opposition first of all to existentialism as a current of thought that excels in the investigation of human existence. Apart from this, theoreticians who associate themselves with structuralism also define it as a form of philosophy against all other forms of philosophy that assign a constitutive role to the human subject or subjectivity in general in the event of formation of meaning and institution. Phenomenology, in particular the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, is the main target of attack by structuralist thinkers.

Consider first of all the usage of the term “structuralism” as the method of structural analysis. It has been developed in the human sciences since the early twentieth century. Its origin is commonly attributed to the method demonstrated by the modern linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) in his work Course in General Linguistics (first published posthumously in 1916) (Saussure 1972). The empirical method of the natural sciences prevalent at the turn of the century takes the physical properties shown by natural objects as the primary order, and considers the construction of physical laws as a result of association and induction based on empirical observations of physical phenomena. In contrast, the structural method invented by Saussure in his observation of linguistic phenomena advocates the direction of the investigating gaze onto structures that are results of theoretical construction in the form of conceptual pairs regulating relations between elements in a linguistic system, rather than, like the natural sciences, paying attention to the properties shown by individual elements within this same linguistic system. By proposing the binary conceptual pairs of signifier and signified, langue (as a codified system of linguistic signs) and parole (as living speech), synchrony and diachrony, as well as the constitutive function of difference among written signs and sound images in the formation of linguistic meaning, Saussure has initiated the school of research in the human sciences known later under the name “structuralism” without himself inventing this name.
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Under this structural method, the role played by the totality and the form of the system is greater than that played by individual elements distinguished by particular properties. This is because these properties can manifest their specific character and function only within the systematic whole in which one element enters into relation with other elements. In a word, it is structures that define the properties of individual elements and not otherwise. In addition, structures as relational totalities exhibit characters irreducible to properties of individual elements or to their quantitative summation (Piaget 1968, 8). Structures are thus eidetic structural variants that regulate the behavior of individual elements within the system. Such mode of theorization is not only anti-empiricist (anti-associationist and anti-psychological), but also anti-positivist.

70.2. Phenomenology as ally of the structural method

If structuralism is understood from its methodological choice, phenomenology from the very beginning is a sort of ally to structuralism. In the first volume of Logical Investigations, Prolegomena to a Pure Logic, Husserl has explained with exemplary clarity and patience his anti-psychological standpoint in the elucidation of the origin of truth pertaining to the domain of logic. According to Husserl, logic is a normative discipline; the laws which govern logical thinking are not laws of nature. The origin of the validity of logical deduction and of the laws governing the validity of logical thinking is not to be searched for in the mind as the domain of psychic reality. Logical propositions and logical rules are objects of ideality. They belong to an order of being beyond and in distinction to objects of the psychological order, this latter being understood as an order of natural reality subtracted from its physical or material substructure.

The anti-psychological standpoint of the Prolegomena prepares Husserl to investigate into the order of ideality to which belongs linguistic meaning in general. In Investigation I of the Logical Investigations, Husserl devotes detailed efforts to explicate the status of ideality of units of linguistic meaning and distinguishes it from the accidental external expressive formulae. Investigations III and IV of the Logical Investigations are devoted to the study of the theory of the wholes and the parts as well as the distinction between independent and non-independent meanings. While the parts are non-independent components of a linguistic expression, only the whole enjoys a veritable independent status. Husserl tries to show that laws governing logical thinking and linguistic meaning are eidetic and enjoy the status of a priori. In Investigation V, Husserl moves to the terrain of phenomenology proper: the study of the general structure of consciousness as intentional experience. Referring to the pioneering role played by Brentano in the discovery of intentionality of consciousness, Husserl declares that consciousness as “mental phenomenon is characterized by what the medieval schoolmen called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and by what we call … the relation to a content, the direction to an object … or an immanent objectivity” (Hua XIX/2, 554).

The most comprehensive defining characteristics of consciousness is thus: it enters necessarily into an “intentional relation” with a certain content (Hua XIX/2, 555). Consciousness is then a structural form under which individual objects can enter into the phenomenal field of appearance. This essential definition of consciousness in terms of intentionality as a structural a priori confers to it implicitly a transcendental status, as consciousness understood in this sense does not belong to the realm of human psychic reality. In a later lecture course that begins by presenting the “Task and Significance of the Logical Investigations,” Husserl explains that consciousness as the internal passivities and activities in which ideal objectivities such as logical and mathematical entities “are subjectively formed and become intuitively disclosed by methodic reflection and phenomenological analyses, are not empirical contingencies of human act-living, not contingent facticities …. Rather, … these lived experiences … must have their essentially necessary
and everywhere identical structure” (Hua IX, 38/27). Toward the end of his life, Husserl even uses the term “structural form” to describe the general character of the most universal form of judgment in his genealogical studies of logic published under the title *Experience and Judgment*:

From this exposition of the original givenness of a universal content “in general”, it is evident that the universal being thus “in general” is a higher structural form which includes in its sense the idea of a particular “in general” and raises it to a higher form.  

Thus it can be said that the phenomenological method of analysis practiced by Husserl includes already a structural, if not yet structuralist, perspective.

In the post-Husserlian development of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is among the first philosophers to embrace the method of structural analysis in his effort to provide a phenomenological elucidation of the specific character of human experience. In his first book *The Structure of Behavior* (finished in 1939 but first published 1942), Merleau-Ponty introduces the structural study of the three different modes of behavior shown in the three levels of organisms. They are respectively: 1) syncretic behaviors in simple organisms such as insects, which are basically limited to reflex actions as response to stimulus of the environment; 2) amovable behaviors in higher animals such as hens and chimpanzees, which are vital activities exhibiting comprehension of structural relations beyond mere physical properties through genuinely learning activities; and 3) symbolic behaviors specific to humans, which, by means of symbols and signs, serve to express their sentiments, choices, and reflections through the projection of a virtual space on the basis of, but also superimposed on, their original life-world. These three modes of behavior correspond respectively to those of the material order, the vital order, and the human order of spirit or mind. Merleau-Ponty has integrated in a critical manner the findings of Gestalt theorists such as Wolfgang Köhler, Adhémar Gelb and Kurt Goldstein into the phenomenological method demonstrated by Husserl. Merleau-Ponty declares that all behaviors, even at the lowest level, have to be understood as “forms,” namely:

> total processes whose properties are not the sum of those which the isolated parts would possess …. [T]here is form wherever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves.

*(Merleau-Ponty 1942, 49–50/47)*

Thus to Merleau-Ponty the basic structures of behavior are forms that are dialectical, reciprocal, and dynamic relations irreducible to mechanical causality determined linearly. In addition, these three modes or orders of behavior do not exist in isolation from one another, but rather relate to one another in an integrative manner. The higher orders of behaviors integrate that or those of the lower order(s) to form a hierarchy of behaviors of increasing complexity. Each order of behavior exhibits properties characteristic of itself in view of exercising some specific function. Yet even in the lowest order of behavior, that of the physical order, properties and laws have to be understood by the notion of “structure” or “form,” which is defined as an ensemble of forces in a state of equilibrium or of constant change such that no law is formulable for each part taken separately and such that each vector is determined in size and direction by all the others … . In other words, each form constitutes a field of forces characterized by a law which has no meaning outside the limits of
the dynamic structure considered, and which on the other hand assigns its properties to each internal point so much so that they will never be absolute properties, properties of this point.

\[\text{(Merleau-Ponty 1942, 147–148/137–138)}\]

In short, the phenomenological descriptions undertaken by Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure of Behavior* serve to show that the three orders of behavior are structurally distinct but ontologically intertwined. They obey the logic of the whole and the parts in which the whole exhibits a unitary meaning, which is beyond the quantitative summation of the parts and is irreducible to them.

The logic of the whole and the parts receives further attention in Merleau-Ponty’s second book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). In contrast to empiricism and intellectualism, which both deny any meaningful configuration to the object perceived in an act of perception, Merleau-Ponty shows through phenomenological descriptions that perceptual experience even at the elementary level is a self-organized activity. The basic component of elementary perception is the Gestalt, which is the threshold of the meaningful whole articulated through the appearance of the figure against the background (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 9–10, 4). It shows, in addition, that any meaning formation, even elementary perceptual meaning, is diacritical in nature, in which a movement of differentiation is involved and plays a constitutive role. Merleau-Ponty is thus entirely in tune with the structural linguistics of Saussure.

One of the central concepts of Merleau-Ponty’s very rich phenomenology of the embodied subject undertaken in the 1945 masterwork, the corporeal schema, also functions as a kind of Gestalt: it is the inter-sensorial unity as the basic meaning bearing corporeal gesture of the human subject at the pre-reflective level. The corporeal schema is also self-organized. Its introduction serves to express that the spatial and temporal unity, the inter-sensorial unity, or the sensorimotor unity of the body is, so to speak, in principle unity, to express that this unity is not limited to contents actually and fortuitously associated in the course of our experience, that it somehow precedes them and in fact makes their association possible.

\[\text{(Merleau-Ponty 1942, 115–116/102)}\]

Here again Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the precedence of the corporeal schema as the structural unitary form over the particular sensorial contents and their association. This observation is in strict conformity with the structural method. It is with the concept of corporeal schema that Merleau-Ponty is able to give a phenomenologically based philosophical elucidation of the phenomenon of phantom-limb.

If structuralism is understood as a kind of philosophy for the human sciences, characterized by its structural method and its anti-psychological and anti-positivist position, as well as its adherence to the logic of the whole and the parts, phenomenology, which accepts all of the above principles in theory and practice, should be considered as an ally of structuralism.

### 70.3. Phenomenology faced to structuralism in its polemical usage

Notwithstanding the adherence of phenomenological philosophers to the same basic principles of the structural method, the later prevalence of the structural method in the human sciences, which has given rise to structuralism as a school, has rebounded onto phenomenology as a target of its polemical attack. Led by Claude Lévi-Strauss, the structural anthropologist, Roland Barthes, the literary theorist, Jacques Lacan, the psychoanalyst, and later by the philosopher
Michel Foucault, the success of structuralism in France rendered the term phenomenology hardly audible to the French intellectual public in the 1960s, except to be understood as a pale and outmoded philosophy of subject. Other than the criticism by Lévi-Strauss of Sartre’s philosophy of subject,1 Foucault’s stigmatization of the philosophy of subject by the expression “the disappearance of man” (“la disparition de l’homme”) (Foucault 1966, 397/386), an expression that is not only directed against Sartre, but also against the phenomenology of Husserl and implicitly that of Merleau-Ponty, put phenomenology as a whole in a position of defense in the intellectual climate of France in the 1960s.

The basic reason for structuralist thinkers to take Husserl’s phenomenology as their main target of attack is that Husserl’s phenomenology after the Logical Investigations evolved into transcendental phenomenology, expressed in Ideas I (1913). After the operation of the transcendental reduction, designed by Husserl as the methodological guarantee against the naivety of the natural attitude, which maintains not only the pre-reflective belief of the existence of the world but also that every worldly existent belongs to the order of natural reality, the transcendental reflective consciousness emerges as the constitutive origin of the meaning and ontic validity of every object. This confers an idealist appearance to Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Owning to the ambiguity of the term “constitution” employed by Husserl, phenomenology, in particular Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, is often considered as a philosophical subjectivism that reduces all meaning formation to transcendental subjectivity. Some commentators simply present Husserlian phenomenology and structuralism as two diametrically opposite modes of thought. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow are among the most notorious of these commentators. They present their view in the following way:

The structuralist approach attempts to dispense with both meaning and the subject by finding objective laws which govern all human activity …. Structuralists attempt to treat human activity scientifically by finding basic elements (concepts, actions, classes of words) and the rules or laws by which they are combined …. Transcendental phenomenology, as defined and practiced by Edmund Husserl, is the diametric opposite of structuralism. It accepts the view that man is totally object and totally subject, and investigates the meaning-giving activity of the transcendental ego which gives meaning to all objects including its own body, its own empirical personality, and the culture and history which it “constitutes” as conditioning its empirical self.

(Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, xix–xx)

In this presentation, Dreyfus and Rabinow commit several errors in the understanding of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. 1. The “transcendental ego” is not “man” as an anthropological existence, but the transcendental consciousness that emerges after the transcendental reduction. 2. The transcendental ego does not give meaning arbitrarily, but assures the role of the subjective pole in the essential structure of the phenomenal field, which is the necessary structural referent of any meaning conferred to an object. Thus, Husserlian transcendental phenomenology is never a unilaterally subjectivistic philosophy.

In fact, though there is an idealist appearance in the transcendental phenomenology in Husserl’s Ideas I, its core is the description of the essential structural form and structural components of the field of phenomenality. Intentionality of consciousness as the key to the essential structure of the field of appearance is always understood according to the index of subject–object correlation as in the Logical Investigations. The meaning of an object in the phenomenal field is elucidated through its status as intentional object of consciousness. It is always this intentional relation or correlation that defines the mode of appearance of any object whatsoever. The
“constitution” chosen by Husserl to account for the event of meaning formation should be understood as “meaning announced to the transcendental consciousness” in this structure of subject–object correlation, rather than as meaning given out unilaterally by the transcendental subject. For the transcendental consciousness never interprets or gives meaning to a given object arbitrarily. As reflective consciousness, the transcendental consciousness plays both a passive and an active role. It plays the passive role of receiving the meaning announced about the object, and also plays the active role of confirming this meaning according to the mode of givenness of the object in question. That is why Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology does not operate Kant’s Copernican revolution (overturn) by demanding the conformity of the object to the thinking subject. On the contrary, Husserl’s transcendental reduction operates an overturn of this Kantian overturn by demanding the transcendental consciousness as the reflective subject to conform itself with the givenness of the phenomenal field.

What is important is that the transcendental consciousness assures the validity of meaning formation through its reflective acts. Under the transcendently reflective attitude, consciousness plays the role of the guarantee of the validity of the meaning of the object announced within this intentional relation; otherwise the meaning announced risks being arbitrary. In this sense, transcendental phenomenology is never unilaterally subject oriented, as misunderstood by its structuralist critiques, but always maintains the subject–object correlation.

One of the major criticisms of structuralists against Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is related to the negligence of the central role of language in the activity of meaning formation. To Lévi-Strauss, the rich meanings of myths of peoples without writing is the proof that language alone is necessary for meaning formation in which the subject has no role to play. In particular, the structures he discovers in these myths often operate unconsciously at the very depth of the human mind. In resonance to this, Michel Foucault, in the Preface to the first French edition of Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique, declares that he is not working on the history of language of madness, but rather “the archaeology of this silence” (Foucault 1994, 160/xxviii). Myths of peoples without writing and the mind of the madmen reduced to silence are, of course, objects that can never be attained by the transcendental reduction. They are narratives without authors and thus beyond the reach of the transcendental reflective subject. Yet Foucault himself, in order to argue that insanity or unreason can have its own meaning or “rationality,” refers to Hölderlin and Nietzsche as immensely talented creative authors. But from where do the creative works of these authors come? How are they created? In the language of structuralism, these are the questions of the how, the where and the when of the formation of the structures (Piaget 1968, 10).

The negation of any role given to the subject by structuralism results in the impossibility of accounting for creation and action. The human will is necessary for the understanding of creation and action. But, to structuralism, the human will seems inexistential. There is also the problem of the becoming of reason, as well as the relation between reason and unreason. If there is the distinction between reason and unreason, is reason a result of the state of culture? If so, then unreason is inherent to the state of nature: this runs counter to the thesis of Foucault, which argues that unreason or madness is a product of modern Western culture. In any case, there is the problem of the genesis of reason and unreason.

There is also the problem of the genesis of institutions from the sedimentation of new ideas and new actions in the social existence of human being. And for the individual human being, when she is aware of her situation, her birth and her death, that is to say her limits as a finite existence, the question of choice and preference arises. These are the questions that evolve around the problem of individual existence. But it seems evident that structuralism cannot provide any help in this area.
With reference to the problem of the condition of possibility of creativity and action, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the embodied subject provides a much better solution than structuralism. In his genetic phenomenological study of language, Merleau-Ponty advances two important theses. 1. There are pre-linguistic or extra-linguistic meanings manifested through bodily gestures in the form of “gestural signification” (signification gestuelle) (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 209/184). In the era of globalization, traveling to a foreign country in which we do not master its language is a common experience. Facial expressions such as a smile and bodily gestures such as stretching out a hand to shake with an unknown person are very important ways to express meaning outside of language. Gestural signification is also fundamental in the understanding of music, paintings, dance, and drama. 2. Underneath the accomplished speech, there is the speaking speech or speech in the nascent state (la parole à l’état naissant) (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 229–202). The latter is a first-time expression in which a ready-made articulated meaningful expression is not at the disposal by the speaking subject. The speaking subject wants to inaugurate a new meaning. Language is needed, but not all meanings are linguistic meanings and there are conditions other than language such as the mind, the intention, and creativity. With speech in the nascent state, Merleau-Ponty not only can explain the ordinary experience of difficulty in first expressions, but can also understand creative works in writing and thoughts.

Lévi-Strauss’ structural anthropology has the immense merit of showing that the society of peoples without writing is not at all a primitive society as it observes the basic structures of organization of social and cultural life of the so-called advanced and civilized societies. The mind of these peoples is neither primitive in the sense of lacking of a logic of thinking. Rather, the savage mind follows a logic of the concrete. Yet why is there the formation of sophisticated institutions in peoples with writing? With writing, there is the genesis of institution in human culture as history and the consciousness of history. The structural method provides no key to this question necessary for the understanding of the genesis of the various forms of human culture and their mutation. By investigating the mode of being of objects outside of natural reality, Husserl has provided a key to the understanding of the genesis of culture in his discovery of the ideality of spiritual existence, which is the basis of historicity, in the manuscript Origin of Geometry. The late Merleau-Ponty has pursued further the Husserlian effort of genetic phenomenology to sketch an ontology of the flesh as ontology of the wild being to understand the genesis of ideas. Merleau-Ponty suggests that in addition to purely intelligible ideas there are sensible ideas which not only draw the line between nature and culture, but also connect nature to culture (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 195–199/149–152). Ideas can act on nature in such a way that they transform nature by intertwining with it to form culture as institutions.

The action of ideas on the human mind plays an important role in the process of coming to awareness of the situation in which the human being, individually and collectively, finds herself. This process of coming to awareness of the human mind is at the origin of the genesis of the consciousness of value and the motivation to actions. Actions eventually lead to the modification and even transformation of the natural life process. Thus the question of existence is not a question posed by a particular school of thought but by human life itself and shows a perennial status. While structuralism cannot answer the question of the genesis of culture as an institutional form of collective life from nature, it also evades the question of existence. In a certain way, structuralism as a thinking movement à la mode came to an end in France when students taking part in the events of May 1968 shouted: “La structure ne descend pas dans la rue!” (“Structure does not go down into the street.”) While structuralism is a school of thought, phenomenology is both a method and a philosophy of subject attentive to questions of life and existence as well as the genesis of culture and institutions and historicity.
Notes

1 Husserl 1973, 372, emphasis by Husserl.
2 The term “behavior” used by Merleau-Ponty is basically the equivalent of the phenomenological concept of experience, in contrast to the connotation that the North American school of behaviorism confers on it. *Cf.*, the admirably clear and well-informed entry on “Maurice Merleau-Ponty” by Ted Toadvine in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Toadvine 2018).
3 This is the subtitle of the book by Peter Caws, *Structuralism* (Caws 1988).
4 The whole last chapter (Ch. IX, “Histoire et dialectique”) of *La pensée sauvage* by Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1962) is devoted to the criticism of Sartre’s effort to elucidate the role of subject of practice in history in *Critique de la raison dialectique*, 1 (Sartre 1960).

References