

# **AMBIGUITY, ABSURDITY, AND REVERSIBILITY: INDETERMINACY IN DE BEAUVOIR, CAMUS, AND MERLEAU-PONTY**

Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are only three of the numerous French philosophers who have expressed an intellectual debt to the work of Edmund Husserl. Despite the different concerns and approaches each of these three exhibit in their respective works, there is a rather striking similarity in that aspect of Husserl's thought which they choose to focus on and develop in their own unique ways. This aspect is Husserl's emphasis on the indeterminacy or obscurity that is an inherent component of each of our intentional acts.

## **Husserlian Indeterminacy**

The notion of indeterminacy is repeatedly evoked in Husserl's thought, yet he never explores its ramifications for his own phenomenological project in sufficient depth. Perhaps this is due, above all, to the challenge that an emphasis on indeterminacy poses for Husserl's eidetic reduction. The challenge involves the successful negotiation of a double-bind: to discuss the phenomena in their givenness as phenomena requires a corresponding discussion of the indeterminate ways in which they are given, and yet, it is this very indeterminacy that seems to threaten an understanding of the essential manner and mode in which they appear. In Husserl's own work, he frequently circumvents this double-bind by pursuing the former approach at the expense of the latter, namely, by systematically discussing the various ways in which intentional objects are presented to consciousness through a "zone of indeterminacy." This zone of indeterminacy becomes very closely identified with the horizontal nature of our everyday

experiences as in the following passage from *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* when Husserl asserts that:

the particular object of our active consciousness, and correlatively the active, conscious having of it, being directed toward it, and dealing with it- all this is forever surrounded by an atmosphere of mute, concealed, but cofunctioning validities, a vital horizon into which the active ego can also direct itself voluntarily, reactivating old acquisitions, consciously grasping new apperceptive ideas, transforming them into intuitions. Because of this constantly flowing horizontal character, then, every straightforwardly performed validity in natural world-life always presupposes validities extending back, immediately or mediately, into a necessary subsoil of obscure but occasionally available reactivatable validities, all of which together, including the present acts, make up a single indivisible, interrelated complex of life.<sup>1</sup>

What are these "obscure validities" that cannot be separated from the "single indivisible, interrelated complex of life?" To call them validities and to emphasize their inextricability in relation to our everyday experiences indicates quite strongly the fundamental role that these indeterminate aspects of existence play in each and every one of our reflective (and pre-reflective) acts. Moreover, their indeterminacy which, as Husserl tells us, can only "occasionally" be made available to our intentional consciousness, seems to be primarily a function of their character as possibilities, possibilities not yet or previously chosen, which nonetheless influence the meaning that is given to the present experience. Thus, this indeterminacy can be viewed, to a large extent, as arising out of the temporality of human existence; a temporality characterized by a present which is articulated out of the horizons of the past and the future, temporal dimensions that are by their very nature in flux, and therefore, indeterminate.

And yet, to understand the indeterminacy that underlies our experiences merely as a function of temporality would be an oversimplification of Husserl's own, complex understanding of the horizontal nature of those experiences. For it is important to

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<sup>1</sup> P. 149.

remember that there are two horizons that Husserl asks us to take into account when we want to understand what it means to perceive a thing, the "internal" horizon and the "external" horizon, both of which have their own significance, their own possibilities, and their own indeterminacy.<sup>2</sup>

Husserl distinguishes the internal and the external horizon and the role that they play in our perception of things as follows:

For consciousness the individual thing is not alone; the perception of a thing is perception of it within a perceptual field. And just as the individual thing in perception has meaning only through an open horizon of "possible perceptions," insofar as what is actually perceived "points" to a systematic multiplicity of all possible perceptual exhibitings belonging to it harmoniously, so the thing has yet another horizon: besides this "internal horizon" it has an "external horizon" precisely as a thing within a field of things; and this points finally to the whole "world as perceptual world."<sup>3</sup>

The internal horizon, then, refers to the multiplicity of possible perceptions I can have of a given thing, and these perceptions as well as this thing are located within a perceptual field that includes other things and the possible perceptions I may have of them. This external horizon in turn points toward the *world* which serves as the continuous horizon for all of my actual and possible experiences. Indeterminacy appears in and through all three of these horizons and, to the extent that any one thing or aspect of a thing is rendered determinate, other things, their aspects, and the perceptual field itself will necessarily remain indeterminate.

Despite the presence of indeterminacy as a factor to be reckoned with in all of my experiences on several different levels, in *Ideas* Husserl is optimistic about the potential for making more

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<sup>2</sup> Ultimately there are three such horizons: the internal horizon that is tied to the possible perceptions available through any one thing; the external horizon that consists of the perceptual field in which that thing is situated; and the world horizon which in turn situates the perceptual field.

<sup>3</sup> *The Crisis of European Sciences*, p. 162.

and more aspects of experience determinate. While he acknowledges on the one hand that:

an experience that has become the object of a personally directed glance, and so has the modus of the deliberately looked at, has its own fringe of experiences that are not deliberately viewed . . . a fringe of background inattention showing relative differences of clearness and obscurity, as well as of emphasis and lack of relief

he also sees this as a source of eidetic possibilities that are actualized by bringing:

what is not the object of a personally directed look within the focus of pure mental vision, raising the unemphatic into relief, and making the obscure clear and ever clearer.<sup>4</sup>

What is especially significant about these passages, is that they make clear Husserl's methodological commitment, namely, to render the indeterminate aspects of experience as determinate as possible. This project is a familiar one that Husserl has himself inherited from the Cartesian tradition. The transition from Descartes to Husserl in the conceptualization of this project includes Husserl's recognition that, in order to make some aspects of experience determinate, other aspects of experience will, as a direct consequence of this determinacy, remain indeterminate.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Husserl views this indeterminacy positively precisely insofar as it is against these indeterminate horizons that objects can be brought into relief. And yet, Husserl holds out the hope that we can (perhaps at some future time) concern ourselves with these indeterminate aspects of experience, making them determinate through the deliberate focus of our attention, which in turn suggests that the indeterminacy is primarily a function of attention (that is, results from the very nature of intentional consciousness) rather than an essential aspect of the phenomena themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> P. 220.

<sup>5</sup> In a sense, Descartes also acknowledges this in the *Discourse on Method*, however, he places the primary blame for this indeterminacy on memory which is limited in its ability to keep a large number of ideas clearly and distinctly before our view.

What is so distinctive about the ways in which Camus, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty invoke and develop Husserl's notion of indeterminacy in their own work is their transformation of indeterminacy from being more of a *consequence* of intentionality to a fundamental feature of human existence, one which extends beyond our intentional awareness of our situation, characterizing the situation as such. For de Beauvoir, indeterminacy is explored through the notion of ambiguity: an irreducible ambiguity that characterizes human existence and which demands a response through concrete human actions, actions that can in no way dispel or diminish the ambiguity, but which allow us to *live* this ambiguity in meaningful ways. Camus interprets indeterminacy as existential absurdity; an absurdity which threatens the attempt to give meaning to one's life and which therefore makes suicide the "one truly serious philosophical problem."<sup>6</sup> Finally, Merleau-Ponty investigates the *corporeal* significance of indeterminacy through the phenomenon of reversibility: a phenomenon that is revealed through the constant, mutual interaction between the flesh that is my body and the flesh that is the world.

### Indeterminacy as Ambiguity

"From the very beginning," de Beauvoir tells us in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, "existentialism defined itself as a philosophy of ambiguity."<sup>7</sup> This ambiguity she traces back to Kierkegaard and his opposition to Hegelian dialectic which ultimately surpasses ambiguity through the *Aufhebung* reconciling thesis and antithesis. Indeed, de Beauvoir suggests, without ambiguity, without "failure" there can be no ethics. Instead of focusing on the ethical ramifications of ambiguity which de Beauvoir explores in this text, let us address the following two questions: What does this ambiguity consist in precisely, and why can it be understood as a type of failure?

Elaborating on the Sartrean claim that "man is a useless passion," de Beauvoir tells us that:

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<sup>6</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> p. 9.

man, in his vain attempt to be God, makes himself exist as man, and if he is satisfied with this existence, he coincides exactly with himself. It is not granted him to exist without tending toward this being which he will never be. But it is possible for him to want this tension even with the failure which it involves. His being is lack of being, but this lack has a way of being which is precisely existence.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the ambiguity of existence refers to a tension that arises through our making ourselves what we are (existing beings whose existence is defined as *lack*) by trying to be what we are not (God or absolute coincidence of in-itself and for-itself). Insofar as what we are cannot be reconciled with what we are not, the tension is maintained, and it is the ongoing negotiation of this very tension that resists negotiation that de Beauvoir identifies with the failed project of human existence. The tension involves failure because it allows us to coincide with what we are precisely when we fail to coincide with what we are not and what we are is a lack that defies coincidence. And, it is this failure that reveals the essential ambiguity of human existence, namely, the co-existence of two different ways of inhabiting our situation which must be simultaneously lived through without either of them ever being attained or reconciled with one another.

This fundamental, ontological ambiguity that is tied to the Sartrean duality and impossibility of for-itself and in-itself is not the primary ambiguity that de Beauvoir is concerned with in this text, however. Instead, it provides the basis for her call for an "existentialist" acknowledges rather than avoids the ambiguity of our existence, and actively seeks to realize this ambiguity in our everyday lives. Realizing this ambiguity involves refusing to posit one's ends as absolutes, that is, refusing to believe in "unconditioned values." And, it is by recognizing the relativity of the ends that we nonetheless attempt to arrive at absolutely in our actions, that we confront another type of ambiguity, namely, the ethical ambiguity that arises when we are faced with the perpetual dilemma of having to perform actions that require absolute commitments without ever being able to attain absolute justifications for them. Finally, it is because there are no

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<sup>8</sup> *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 12-13.

unconditioned values that we can be forced to choose between two mutually incompatible but mutually compelling alternatives, and this gives rise to ethical ambiguity in the fullest sense of the word, an ambiguity that *must* be decisively reckoned with, but which cannot ever be satisfactorily resolved one way or the other.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly enough, De Beauvoir compares this existentialist conversion, this recognition and embracing of the ambiguity of existence, to a Husserlian reduction whereby one "brackets" one's "will to be" in order to be made conscious of one's "true condition."<sup>10</sup> For, she asserts:

just as phenomenological reduction prevents the errors of dogmatism by suspending all affirmation concerning the mode of reality-of the external world, whose flesh and bone presence the reduction does not, however, contest, so existentialist conversion does not suppress my instincts, desires, plans, and passions. It merely prevents any possibility of failure by refusing to set up as absolutes the ends towards which my transcendence thrusts itself, and by considering them in their connection with the freedom which projects them.<sup>11</sup>

The "true condition," which the Husserlian reduction allows us to be made conscious of, involves consciousness of the interdependency of noesis and noema, of the intentional act which identifies a given phenomenon as such, and of the intentional object which orients and gives meaning to the intentional act. To recognize the fundamental connection between noesis and noema is also to deny

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<sup>9</sup> A famous example of such a dilemma comes from *Being and Nothingness* when Sartre discusses the need for a young man to decide whether to fight for his country or to stay home and care for his farm and his family. A decision must be made, and it requires choosing one of the two alternatives. The situation is ambiguous because both courses of action can be ethically defended, and yet they are incompatible. One and only one of the alternatives *must* be chosen and this requires fulfilling some responsibilities at the expense of others. The ethical challenge, Sartre declares, is not for the young man (or for us) to proclaim that one alternative is right and one is wrong, but to decide, *individually*, which course of action is right for oneself, at that time, in that situation. And, once decided upon, Sartre suggests, one's commitment should be to that choice, *even while* one acknowledges the validity of the option not chosen.

<sup>10</sup> *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 14.

the existence of absolutes; it is to deny the presence of meanings independent of consciousness and consciousness independent of meaning. Moreover, de Beauvoir's association of the existentialist conversion with Husserl's phenomenological reduction also points towards the close link between the indeterminacy that is revealed in and through the reduction and the ambiguity that characterizes human existence.

### **Indeterminacy as Absurdity**

In his essay, "An Absurd Reasoning," Camus credits Husserl with opening "to intuition and to the heart a whole proliferation of phenomena, the wealth of which has about it something inhuman."<sup>12</sup> It is striking that Camus associates the richness of the phenomena Husserl opens up for phenomenological investigation with "something inhuman," because, for Husserl, insofar as the phenomena are capable of being grasped as such, they are tied inextricably to human (intentional) activity. And yet, what Camus is appealing to with this notion of the "inhuman" is that which is foreign to human affairs and, more importantly, human comprehension. Indeed, Camus identifies Husserl as one of those "men who vie with one another in proclaiming that nothing is clear, all is chaos, that all man has is his lucidity and his definite knowledge of the walls surrounding him."<sup>13</sup> I am not sure that Husserl would have been comfortable with this evaluation of his project, however, what Camus is suggesting here is that a primary contribution Husserl has made to the phenomenological and existentialist traditions, has been to open up a range of phenomena for investigation that are, on principle, incapable of being articulated fully. Moreover, Camus suggests in this passage that the inability to arrive at a comprehensive description of these phenomena that together constitute the life-world, is due to the very nature of the things themselves which resist human "lucidity."

Although I would argue that Husserl does not posit such a poignant conflict between the phenomena and the human lucidity

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<sup>12</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, pp. 20-21.

which tries to grasp their essences, the grounds for such a reading of Husserl are established in part through Husserl's emphasis on the "experience-fringe," or the indeterminate features of each experience which are not deliberately focused on and whose presence leads Husserl to formulate "the eidetically valid and self-evident proposition, that no concrete experience can pass as independent in the full sense of the term." Husserl's awareness of the "walls" surrounding our attempts to subject our experiences to human lucidity can also be found in his subsequent claim that each concrete experience "'stands in need of completion' in respect of some connected whole, which in form and in kind is not something we are free to choose, but are rather bound to accept."<sup>14</sup>

Camus interprets our being compelled to accept aspects of the situation which we have not chosen as revealing the irrationality (incomprehensibility) of our situation. He claims that each of us has a "longing for happiness and for reason" which can be understood as a longing to break down the barriers that bar the way to human lucidity, thereby attaining the happiness that comes from conquering this "alien" or irrational territory and expanding the domain of reason. This kind of happiness, however, can never be attained; indeed, "the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." Rather than trying to negate or avoid this absurdity by either denying the need or refusing to confront it with what cannot be understood, Camus asserts that absurdity "must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it."<sup>15</sup>

This longing for happiness attained through reason and the impossibility of satisfying it is most poignantly reflected in Camus' own myth of Sisyphus. In his retelling of this Greek myth, Camus presents the compatibility of the longing, the recognition of its absurdity which arises out of the irrationality of the situation, and the possibility of a new kind of happiness when he calls Sisyphus the "absurd hero" whom we must imagine happy. Sisyphus' "defiant" happiness is happiness in the face of the longing,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ideas*, p. 221.

<sup>15</sup> *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 21.

happiness which refuses to give up the human need out of which this longing is born. For Camus, it is the recognition and embracing of this need and the simultaneous acknowledgement of the impossibility of satisfying it which is the truly affirmative act.

### **Indeterminacy as Reversibility**

In his commemorative essay to Husserl, "The Philosopher and His Shadow," Merleau-Ponty sets himself the task of evoking the "unthought-of element in his [Husserl's] works which is wholly his and yet opens out on something else."<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty identifies this unthought-of element with those aspects of our experience which are not graspable through the constituting activity of intentional consciousness. Regarding this constituting activity, Merleau-Ponty asserts that: "Originally a project to gain intellectual possession of the world, constitution becomes increasingly, as Husserl's thought matures, the means of unveiling a back side of things that we have not constituted."<sup>17</sup> This unthought-of element refers to the indeterminate aspect(s) of experience which cannot be made determinate; it is the "experience-fringe" which forms the horizon for each of our perceptions. Merleau-Ponty implies, moreover, that it is unthought-of in at least two different senses: it is unthought-of insofar as it does not get developed in Husserl's own work, and it is unthought-of insofar as it is *incapable* of being constituted by thought.

In Merleau-Ponty's last unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he takes up the challenge of thinking the un-thought by investigating some of these "syntheses which dwell this side of any thesis."<sup>18</sup> One of these "syntheses" is the phenomenon of reversibility, a corporeal "synthesis" that is continually being played out in our daily experiences of touching and being touched, and which is described eloquently by Merleau-Ponty through the example of one hand touching the other. It is a strange kind of

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<sup>16</sup> *Signs*, p. 160.

<sup>17</sup> *Signs*, p. 180.

<sup>18</sup> *Signs*, p. 163.

synthesis, however, because although it is continually enacted it is never completed. The hand that touches is the hand that is touched; the two experiences occur simultaneously but are not perceived simultaneously. We can feel ourselves touching or being touched, and can "reverse" our attention from the one experience to the other, but, just as in the famous duck/rabbit Gestalt, we cannot experience both at once. Moreover, there is no thesis here insofar as this "synthesis" unfolds, for the most part, pre-reflectively; it occurs independently of the constituting activity of consciousness and even when we attempt to grasp it reflectively, it escapes further analysis.

In one of his final, untitled Working Notes, Merleau-Ponty makes a schematic reference to Husserl's desire to analyze that which resists analysis through "disentangling" or "unraveling" what is entangled, and he notes that "the idea of chiasm and lneinander is on the contrary the idea that every analysis that *disentangles* renders unintelligible."<sup>19</sup> Reversibility cannot be "disentangled" because it involves a chiasmic intertwining of the flesh in which the touching and touched are indeed "lneinander." It is because I touch that I can be touched, and if I am not touched, then I will not be able to touch; neither experience is reducible to the other, and yet each makes the other possible.

The duality of touching and being touched is a paradigm for Merleau-Ponty's discussion of reversibility, but the corporeal phenomenon of reversibility also characterizes temporality itself, giving the latter a bodily dimension insofar as "past and present are lneinander, each enveloping-enveloped-and that itself is the flesh."<sup>20</sup> To say that the chiasmic relationship between past and present is the flesh suggests that time and being must be understood together, not apart from one another. And, to deepen our understanding of this relationship in a manner that will avoid disentangling that which is entangled, Merleau-Ponty tells us that we will need "a new kind of intelligibility (intelligibility through the world and Being as they are 'vertical' and not *horizontal*)."

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<sup>19</sup> VI, p. 268, November 1960.

<sup>20</sup> "Time and Chiasm," Nov. 1960, VI, p. 268.

What is this new type of intelligibility that Merleau-Ponty was seeking towards the end of his life? It is an intelligibility that does not seek a wider and wider sphere of determinacy, that does not progress along a linear temporal path, but rather, one which descends into the depths of the phenomena, in a vertical dimension that has no absolute "top" or "bottom" but which allows movement in both directions at once. And perhaps through this descending/ascending, reversible movement, we will be able to uncover that "fungierende or latent intentionality" which Husserl only begins to reveal, "the intentionality within being."<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

At the conclusion of the "Philosopher and his Shadow," Merleau-Ponty states that: "Willy-nilly, against his plans and according to his essential audacity, Husserl awakens a wild-flowering world and mind."<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Camus and de Beauvoir are only three of the many philosophers who have responded to its call. What is so distinctive about their own responses to Husserl's legacy is that they have managed to open up this wild-flowering world and mind which defies straightforward analysis to our gaze, our touch, our activity, and our participation. Each of them seeks meaning within this chaotic turbulence without destroying or denying the fundamental indeterminacy which is its "subsoil." And yet, the meaning they find and explore is not the same; the notions of ambiguity, absurdity, and reversibility cannot be reduced to one another as different names for the phenomenon of indeterminacy.

De Beauvoir's discussion of the ethics of ambiguity focuses on the non-categorical imperatives that compel us to define ourselves through our actions; actions which continually address but cannot resolve an essentially ambiguous situation. Camus searches for happiness through an absurdly defiant affirmation of the insurmountable barriers that are ranged all around human lucidity, an affirmation that can and must say "yes" to life. Finally, Merleau-

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<sup>21</sup> Working Note, VI, p. 244, April 1960.

<sup>22</sup> *Signs*, pp. 180-181.

Ponty explores the reversible interplay between the visible and the invisible dimensions of the flesh, an ongoing dynamic that uncovers new realms of indeterminacy and, therefore, new possibilities for phenomenological investigation.

The different directions taken by de Beauvoir, Camus, and Merleau-Ponty indicate how rich indeed is the subsoil of this wild-flowering region, and, in so doing, they show us that the indeterminacy of the horizon is not at the "fringes" of experience, but at its center.

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