

The Return of the Relative: Hamilton, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and French Phenomenology

Philip Tonner

The University of Glasgow

In this paper we explore the complex relationship between the philosophies of Sir William Hamilton and Henri Bergson. We then place these philosophies in a critical relation to French phenomenological philosophy, particularly, Merleau-Ponty's. By so doing we examine a historical and theoretical 'ark' that rises in 19th Century Scotland and falls in 20th Century France, an ark that has received little attention hitherto by historians of philosophy. Our aim is to open up a new dimension of these philosophies and provoke a fresh debate over their relationships and the philosophical tensions that exist between them.

Introduction

In what follows we want to explore a historical and theoretical ark that rises in 19th Century Scotland and falls in 20th Century France. This ark covers the major philosophical movement in European philosophy, phenomenology, and cuts across a significant alternative, Bergsonism. Both tendencies of thought remain significant in European philosophy. Particularly, we take our point of departure from a provocation that occurred in the philosophical writings of Sir William Hamilton (1791-1856) to the French philosopher Henri Bergson; it is our view that this provocation affected his doctrine of *metaphysical intuition*. Intuition was for Bergson the method of metaphysics whereby the inquirer can, by means of a kind of "intellectual sympathy," place themselves "...within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible" (Bergson 1912, 23-24). In metaphysics, the science which dispenses with *symbols*, absolute reality *qua* duration (*durée*) is revealed through this intuitive method. Duration or *pure time* is absolute reality.

Bergson's notion of metaphysical intuition together with the inner and absolute knowledge afforded by it was born, in part, by a critical relation to William Hamilton's thesis of the *relativity of knowledge*. Bergson's reaction to Hamilton was not without precedent in French thought. The philosophers Ludovic Carrau and Félix Ravaisson anticipate Bergson's view. Bergson was a student of Ravaisson's at the École Normale Supérieure and both Carrau

and Ravaisson were part of that general Spiritualist tendency of thought in the 19th Century of which Bergson is generally regarded as the apotheosis¹. Carrau, in anticipation of Bergson, denies that all knowledge is relative and Ravaisson that, in our experience of habitual implicit understanding, whereby agents can accomplish their tasks by second nature, we achieve not just an external relation to the objects of our knowledge: but also an “immediate understanding in which object and subject are fused” (Gutting 2001, 12). In the genesis of the intuitive method of metaphysics Carrau stands between Hamilton and Bergson: scientific knowledge may be relative but that is not the only kind of knowledge. In anticipation of Bergson, Carrau argues that the living agent is the locus of absolute knowledge (Jaffro 2005).

Bergson’s philosophy represents the highest point of the Spiritualist movement and occupies a critical relation to Hamilton. By returning to Hamilton we are approaching largely uncharted territory with the aim of establishing a novel dialogue in the history of ideas. Hamilton is recognised as a forerunner of phenomenological philosophy but his contribution is rarely discussed in detail and his views are only now beginning to receive attention in relation of Bergson (Jaffro 2005). Hamilton held that knowledge is relative to the knowing mind and *contra* this view, Bergson took it to be possible to gain absolute knowledge. Such knowledge is nothing less than the intuition of metaphysical reality or duration. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* Bergson outlines his view that there are two ways of knowing a thing. The first, by means of analysis, mediated by symbols, approaches its object *externally* and yields only *relative knowledge*. The second, by means of intuition, involves coinciding with the thing by means of a simple act. This knowledge is absolute and perfect, unmediated by symbols, and yields knowledge of ultimate reality *qua* duration. Such intuition belongs to metaphysics and metaphysics is “...*the science which claims to dispense with symbols*” (Bergson 1912, 24).

It is our thesis that the fate of Bergsonian absolute knowing was not altogether a happy one. By the 1930s and 40s the new generation of French philosophers were moving away from Bergson’s thought and towards *phenomenology*. This, we shall show, amounts to nothing less than a return of the relative. We will show this by dwelling on some of Merleau-Ponty’s explicit criticisms of Bergson. Phenomenology is the science of phenomena as they are there *for* a living subject. At its core, the phenomenological enterprise reintroduces a fundamental relativity into philosophy. That is, the relativity of the *intended* to the intending subject. Phenomenology, *contra* Bergsonism, represents the French dimension of the tradition of general post-Kantian-

ism in which William Hamilton can be situated. In sum: if Bergsonism is displaced by phenomenology then this reintroduces a fundamental relativity into philosophy. As such, the ghost of Hamiltonian relativity was not completely exorcised in France.

Hamilton and phenomenology

In his *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic* Hamilton tells us that philosophy proper is nothing else than the *science of the mind* and the mind, for Hamilton, is nothing less than “the common name for the states of knowing, willing, feeling, desiring, &c., of which I am conscious, it is... the name for a certain series of connected phænomena” (Hamilton 1869, 138). Philosophy of mind is the *phenomenology of mind* and this science:

is the science conversant about the *phenomena*, or *modifications*, or *states* of the *Mind*, or *Conscious-Subject*, or *Soul*, or *Spirit*, or *Self*, or *Ego* (Hamilton 1869, 129).

Hamilton’s concept of mind is nothing other than the totality of these intentional states and the *phenomenology of mind* he proposes is the science of these states. Such a project already places Hamilton in proximity with later European phenomenology but there is a further connection. This is bound up with the concept of phenomena more generally. The Greek term *phainomenon* enters modern philosophy in Germany as *Phänomen* and takes on the ambiguous sense of *appearance*. This term is ambiguous for two reasons. Firstly, things can be appearances by contrast to what actually is the case and secondly as ‘what is plain to see’, in both the literal and metaphorical sense². In either sense, *Phänomenologie* (phenomenology) is the *science of appearances*. Johann Heinrich Lambert (1728-77) employed what he termed phenomenology (*Phänomenologie*) in his *New Organon* (1764) with the aim of avoiding appearance (*Schein*) in order to attain truth. Appearance for Lambert was an intermediate term between falsity and truth. The practice of phenomenology would result in a system of scientific cognition whereby the *transcendent perspective* would be achieved. Such a perspective entails that each appearance can be related to the true nature of the thing in question, and the true nature of the thing, determined from its appearance.

In Kant the term phenomenology (*Phänomenologie*) appears in his *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* when he undertakes to consider motion, the subject matter of natural science, under its *modal* aspect. As

such, matter's motion or rest is accounted for by reference to its *mode of representation* or modality and that is, as an "appearance of the external senses" (Caygill 1995, 316-317). This sense of phenomenology is less grand than Lambert's sense. However, in a letter to Lambert, Kant admits a broader appreciation of this discipline. There he construes it in terms which anticipate his critical philosophy. Phenomenology is a purely negative science presupposed by metaphysics in which the validity and limitations of the principles of sensibility are determined in advance of their misapplication to objects of pure reason.

In his *Lectures* Hamilton notes the ambivalent nature of the term *phenomenon* (151-152). *Phaenomenon* or appearance can be used to designate "that which reveals itself to our observation, as existent," but can also be used to designate semblance in contrast to being in truth. As he uses it "the term...has been naturalised...as a philosophical substitute for the term appearance" (Hamilton 1869, 152) and that is, as a term for that which appears or reveals itself to consciousness as existent. In the *phænomenology* of mind philosophy is restricted to "facts afforded in consciousness, considered exclusively in themselves" (Hamilton 1869, 124). This move anticipates later phenomenologist's reduction or 'bracketing' of existential claims to consider only the phenomena of consciousness as it is intended. For Hamilton, the philosophical concepts of *phænomena* and subject are correlates, the meaning of which "will be best illustrated by...stating and explaining the great axiom, that all human knowledge...is only of the relative or *phænomenal*" (Hamilton 1869, 136). Hamilton's *phænomenology* can be taken to include an account of *phænomena* as they are revealed for a consciousness, the general account of the human mind wherein these *phænomena* occur. And *phænomenology* is best expounded in terms that uphold the *relativity of knowledge*.

The term *relative* as it occurs in Hamilton's text is opposed to the term *absolute* and the claim that human knowledge is restricted to the relative entails that we know nothing absolutely (137). Crucially, this means that *qua* relative, nothing is known 'without relation to us and our faculties' (Hamilton 1869, 137). That is:

Our knowledge is either of matter or of mind...mind and matter, as known or knowable, are only two different series of *phænomena* or qualities;...Our whole knowledge of mind and matter is...only relative; of existence, absolutely and in itself, we know nothing; (Hamilton 1869, 137-138).

All knowledge is relative to the mind of the knowing subject and mind is nothing other than the multitude of conscious states such as believing, desiring, willing and so on. Taken as known, matter is 'that which appears to us under the forms of extension, solidity, colour, heat and so on' (Hamilton 1869, 137). Mind and matter, are nothing less than consciousness and its phenomena and both are bound up with the relativity of knowledge. Knowledge, for Hamilton:

is relative, 1°, Because existence is not cognisable, absolutely and in itself, but only in special modes; 2°, Because these modes can be known only if they stand in a certain relation to our faculties; and 3°, Because the modes, thus relative to our faculties, are presented to, and known by, the mind only under modifications determined by these faculties themselves (Hamilton 1869, 148).

In short, Hamilton's position is a kind of Protagorean Kantianism: what is known is known *relatively* to our faculties of knowing and as such, humanity is the measure of all things.

Hamilton's use of the term phenomenology is related to the earlier German sense of that term. Phenomenology, the account of the mind and its objects, examines our knowledge of objects relative to our faculties of cognition. Hamilton's phenomenology can be elucidated by reference to the earlier German tradition, culminating in Kant, that sees phenomenology as giving an account of the mind and its objects while maintaining our relative manner of knowing. Hamilton's phenomenology not only places him in relation to that earlier tradition but also places him in relation to subsequent phenomenological philosophy in Germany and France. By taking the phenomenological project to be bound up with an account of the mind and its object as they are known relative to our faculties of knowing them, Hamilton's thought is in proximity to 20th Century phenomenology. In phenomenology, the objects of consciousness are considered in their fundamental relation to a subject.

Hamilton's work does in fact have a presence in early German phenomenology. Both Brentano in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874) and Husserl in his *Logical Investigations, Vol I* (1900) make reference to him. These references dry up by the time phenomenology takes its transcendental turn around the time of the First World War. Contact between Hamilton and phenomenology was never restored. Nonetheless,

later French phenomenology is a continuation of a philosophical tradition with roots in the Kantian project and Hamilton can be situated historically in a direct relation to that tradition.

It is our thesis that, without any conscious knowledge of the fact, the French phenomenologists, particularly Merleau-Ponty, reintroduce that fundamental Hamiltonian theme of the relativity of knowledge. That Merleau-Ponty does so in relation to a critique of Bergson makes things all the more relevant to our given theme. The broad historical ark that rises from Hamilton's thesis of the relativity of knowledge and which passes through the French Spiritualist reaction, in the writings of Carrau, Ravaisson and Bergson, comes back to earth and heralds the return of relativity in the writings of French phenomenology. Phenomenologists maintain a fundamental relativity in "knowledge". That is, relativity to the horizon of the world. This will be Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Bergson.

Bergson and phenomenology

Twentieth Century phenomenology in France stands in that tradition of European thought which can trace its historical antecedence to Kant. Quite explicitly, Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, placed phenomenology in a crucial relation to Kant when he accepted the designation *transcendental idealism* for his project. Phenomenology is not just Kantianism, and transcendental idealism in the phenomenological context means that all reality be treated only in terms of the *meaning* it has for a consciousness. Phenomenology will always bear a relation to the transcendental understood as meaning constitution. In Merleau-Ponty this theme can be discerned in the claim that the body 'constitutes' pre-conceptually the objects of the body-subject's experience.

Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Bergson clearly brings out the tension between the Bergsonian-metaphysical and transcendental-phenomenological view points. The crux of the matter may turn out to be a fundamental tension between different points of view on the nature of our lived experience.

Merleau-Ponty begins with regards to Bergson's discussion of science and metaphysics in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. There, Bergson "has perfectly defined the metaphysical approach to the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 97n15). Metaphysics is the investigation and exploration of the world as it is prior to its investigation by science. Merleau-Ponty will say elsewhere

that the fact that his generation “never read Bergson” meant that they had to wait for the “philosophies of existence” in order to discover what they could have learned from him if they had taken the time to look.³ Bergson’s thought would have revealed to them what they later took to be “discovered” by existential philosophy. When “present day readers” of Husserl or Heidegger encounter something vital in their thought, so says Merleau-Ponty, it is not so much that they encounter a “new philosophy” as it is of “recognizing what they had been waiting for” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, viii). What they had been waiting for was nothing less than access to lived experience of the concrete world. And, in a very Bergsonian sounding passage Merleau-Ponty remarks that this concrete world of lived experience is that world in relation to which “every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, ix).

Merleau-Ponty continues, the question will be whether or not Bergson “remains true” to his method of metaphysics, which Merleau-Ponty effectively reads as a proto-phenomenology working out of a determination of “the matters themselves,” and did not revert back to “the system” when he attempts a full blown metaphysics of the *élan vital*. Only from the “absolute observer’s” point of view could such a metaphysical reality be perceived. As Merleau-Ponty says:

If, for Bergson, intuition really makes us transcend the world, it is because Bergson is not fully aware of his own presuppositions and of that simple fact that all we live is lived against the background of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 97n15).

Such a philosophy of transcendence cannot account for the deeply held relativity phenomenology wishes to maintain. This is not just the relativity of knowledge in the Hamiltonian sense of Protagorean Kantianism but a thorough *existential* relativity. In its very essence, human existence is relative to the world of its perception. Perception is the fundamental mode of existence of the body-subject in its pre-reflective level of immersion in its world. Such perception is the ultimate presupposition of reflective consciousness:

Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act... it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is... the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not ‘inhabit’ only the ‘inner

man'...there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself (Merleau-Ponty 1962, x-xi).

It would be hard to imagine a more forceful rejection of so many Bergsonian themes. Self and world are inseparable. The world is not an object which is made by us, it is rather the irreducible horizon for all our understanding. All of life, including knowledge, is relative to the horizon of the world.

If, on the other hand, Bergson's philosophy does not turn out to be a philosophy of transcendence then things are little better from the phenomenological point of view. That is, if Bergson's philosophy is a philosophy of 'immanence, he may be reproached with having described the human world only in its most general structures (e.g., duration, openness to the future)'. In sum, Bergson's "work lacks a picture of human history which would give a content to these intuitions, which paradoxically remain very general" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 97n15). History, as Merleau-Ponty understands it, is thoroughly human and is conditioned by our *being in the world* (*être au monde*). History can never be seen absolutely, from the outside (Moran 2000, 404). Although the point would be better put, if Bergson is to be the target of such criticism, by saying that there is no perspectiveless knowledge "from the inside," the general point must hold for the phenomenologist. For Merleau-Ponty, as for existential phenomenology generally, all thought, all perception and all existential possibility for being is conditioned by the subject's fundamental condition of being in the world without any recourse to an 'inner realm' of any kind. The result is a thorough going perspectivism. And perspectivism implies relativity.

In making the phenomenologist's point in this way we are immediately reminded of the metaphor Bergson sketches out of an artist's visit to Paris. In an effort to capture "Paris" the artist immediately starts sketching the city's landmarks. By so doing "he substitutes" for "the real and internal organization of the thing" an "external and schematic representation," the result being that "on the whole, his sketch corresponds to an observation of the object from a certain point of view and to the choice of a certain means of representation" (Bergson 1912, 32). Only because the artist has had the "original intuition of the whole" of Paris is he able in hindsight to place his sketches in the folder marked "Paris" and "join them up" so that they cohere and intimate the whole. The inverse operation is, however, impossible:

there is no way of performing the inverse operation; it is impossible, even with an infinite number of accurate sketches, and even with the word “Paris” which indicates that they must be combined together, to get back to an intuition that one has never had, and to give oneself an impression of what Paris is like if one has never seen it (Bergson 1912, 33).

The phenomenologists will not here dispute Bergson’s prioritizing lived experience of the concrete. The discovery and prioritizing of this domain of experience was, after all, what Merleau-Ponty’s generation “had been waiting for.” The fundamental difference can be put as follows: whereas Bergson sees in this metaphysical intuition of the whole the transcendence of the relative and the attaining of the absolute, the phenomenologist will, while recognizing its significance from the first person point of view, maintain the relativity of this perspective. Our lived experience can be as vivid and as singular as Bergson has here outlined and never transcend to an absolutely apprehended metaphysical reality.

Now, Bergson will claim that “by an effort of intuition...an inner, absolute knowledge of the duration of the self by the self is possible” (Bergson 1912, 31). The “fundamental self” (*moi profond*) is this durational self, the self as it is *qua* free creative becoming. Mind and body were for Bergson two aspects of the same dynamic and creative metaphysical reality of the *élan vital* (vital impetus) and the *élan vital* is the creative power characteristic of duration. As he says: “Such is my inner life, and such also is life in general” (Bergson 1998, 258). The *élan vital* is the dynamic principle of all life and the terms life, existence and time are all interchangeable and all denote the “very mobility of being” (Bergson 1998, 337). It is precisely this mobility of being which *cinematographic* science cannot know and to which metaphysics must become attentive.

The elucidation of time *qua* duration marks another point over which phenomenological dissatisfaction persists. Merleau-Ponty makes this criticism in his *Phenomenology of Perception* with reference to a metaphor for consciousness Bergson employs in his *Creative Evolution* (1907). As Merleau-Ponty says:

If...the past still belongs to the present and the present already to the past, there is no longer any past or present. If consciousness snowballs upon itself, it is, like the snowball and everything else, wholly in the

present (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 276n1).

In other words, the temporal structures of past, present and future that orientate the existing individual in the world are dissolved in Bergson's philosophy of time. Paradoxically, for the phenomenologist, Bergson, the philosopher of creative temporal becoming and of the qualitative heterogeneity that is our duration, is undone by an all embracing homogenous present⁴.

The phenomenological tradition, of which Hamilton is a historical antecedent, cannot reconcile itself with Bergson. At the heart of this conflict of perspectives is a difference over the interpretation of the content of our lived experiences. For Bergson, this concrete lived experience finds its highest expression in the experience of duration as opposed to the world of our practical activity. For the existential phenomenologist, our lived experience is fundamentally oriented by our world of practical activity. As such, the ghost of Hamiltonian relativity is present in the post-Bergsonian philosophical scene in France, albeit with a new orientation.

Concluding remarks

William Hamilton stands in that post-Kantian tradition which ultimately gives rise to phenomenology and of which Bergson was always skeptical. Indeed, when he outlines his notion of intuition in "The perception of change," he does so in direct opposition to the Kantian construal of the relativity of knowledge. Kant took metaphysics to be impossible precisely because of the relativity of our knowledge. His greatest "service" to philosophy was to establish that "if metaphysics is possible, it can be so only through an effort of intuition." Nonetheless, Kant "added: this intuition is impossible" (Bergson 1946, 140). From the transcendental-phenomenological perspective, the Bergsonian pursuit of absolute knowledge was always doomed to fail. For Hamilton, knowledge is relative to our manner of knowing. For the existential phenomenologist, all activity, intellectual or otherwise, is relative to the horizon of the world. In that tradition there is just no getting beyond the relativity of knowledge.

In an attempt to remain true to the spirit of provocation, in what we have said we have refused to come down on either side of the debate. Contenting ourselves instead with an elucidation of the points of contact and criticism between two discrete tendencies of thought as they play

themselves out in the 19th and 20th centuries. We have not attempted to show that the phenomenological critique has in fact defeated the Bergsonian interpretation of time and so on. Rather, we have said that they criticize it in terms which herald the return of the relative. There may be a case for arguing that the phenomenological critique *begs the question* against Bergson. Their starting point is the world of our practical activity and, in line with this, they argue that time is to be understood in those terms. They take it as a point of departure that time is as they describe it and so cannot be as Bergson does. That is, they argue for the priority of the practical over the durational. Bergson, while noting our practical and active slant in the world has refused to accord it priority. If, in the end, the conflict over perspectives comes down to conflict over what, in our lived experience, is to take priority, as Gutting has suggested, then the question will remain open: Bergsonism or phenomenology?

Notes

¹ Although Ravaisson never held a university chair, he did see students at the École Normale Supérieure.

² See the entry, 'phenomenology', in: Inwood, M, *A Hegel Dictionary*, (Blackwell, 1992), pp214-216.

³ Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosophy of Existence', in, *Texts and Dialogues*, p132. Cited in Gutting 2001, 114.

⁴ See also, Gutting 2001, 116-117. Gutting's text has been consulted throughout.

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