

From Egology to Ecology

Raphaël Pierrès

Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

The environmental crisis not only requires us to reconsider the anthropocentrism implicit in the dominant political philosophy, it also demands a profound reform in our way of conceiving the relationship of the subject to the world in perception and knowledge. Which theoretical tools should we use to question what an environment is? And more specifically, from an epistemological point of view: what it is to perceive and know one's environment? This is not self-evident: we seem to be caught in a false alternative between a position according to which the objective world of physics is the only one which really exists and everything else has the status of epiphenomena, and, as a reaction to this, a thesis according to which the world of physics is only a theoretical construction which conceals that which really exists: precisely, what appears to a subject. In both cases, the notion of environment seems inconceivable: too subjective, for some, not subjective enough, for others. In order to be able to really think about our position within an environment, we must criticize both the objectivist thought that reduces the real to the physical-mathematical as well as the subjectivist tendency in phenomenology that gives an inordinate role to the ego as the foundation of knowledge. We thus propose a path that is in line with the perspective of a renewal of phenomenology; i.e. a renewed understanding of being-in-the-world.

In the first part of our investigation, we establish some reference points for a phenomenological approach to perception based on a critical reading of Husserl. First of all, there is a critique of psychologism, and, more broadly, of the naive objectivism inherent in the natural sciences: in the attempt of natural scientists to explain perception, they tend to take for granted the very thing that must be understood and questioned in depth. Above all, they substitute the mathematizable for the real, and end up taking only geometric space to be real. But, on the other hand, Husserl seems to give too much to the ego in the process of perception (especially in the Cartesian Meditations). On the contrary, if we draw all the consequences of the Husserlian analysis of correlation and coupling, there is no more immediate truth in 'internal' experience than there is in 'external' experience. It is a question of leaving both the terrain of the world-given-in-advance and the subject-given-in-advance. A new interpretation of intentionality is required, one which draws all the consequences from the impossibility for the subject to constitute the world.

We suggest that the subject participates in the world in a way similar to the participation of a living body in its environment (*Umwelt*), but that it does not univocally determine its meaning. From the perspective of an epistemological investigation, it is therefore important to criticize both the objectivist prejudice and the subjectivist prejudice that constitutes its other side rather than its overcoming. This is the passage from an egology to an ecology. It is a question of reevaluating the notion of *Umwelt* as our primary terrain. This line of research is opened to us by the extremely stimulating re-reading of Husserl proposed by Claude Romano, who explains the limits of the Cartesian path of access to phenomenology, and, at the same time, defends a realism of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), which we rework around the idea of an *Umwelt*-realism in dialogue with

certain analyses given by Jocelyn Benoist. Through my body, and with my concepts – which are situated and partial – I aim at a world that exceeds me, and I do indeed reach something of the world through these means.

More concretely, the various procedures for constituting objectivity – however historical they may be – are indeed effective methods for stabilising our relation to objects and the world. Post-Galilean physics tends to substitute the mathematizable for the real, but we should not forget that measurement actually gives us a grip on reality. It is therefore necessary to maintain both that the world exceeds the procedures for constituting objectivity – in particular physico-mathematical procedures – and that such procedures achieve something effective: they say something about the world insofar as it is measurable; insofar as it lends itself to a certain mathematisation. Consequently, a physical theory of the environment does not speak only about itself; it is not a castle in the air. By giving the objective sciences which study the environment and perception their rightful place, we can consider them as methods of approaching reality and enter into dialogue with some of their lessons. On this basis, we seek to conceive what it is for a living being to perceive in its environment by drawing on Gibson's analysis of the reciprocal relationship between the animal and the environment. Gibson criticises the retinal image paradigm, as well as the stimulus-response scheme. In contrast, he suggests a third way between egology and behaviourism, which consists in approaching the problems of perception from an ecological point of view; more specifically, based on the analysis of the organism-environment relationship. We need to conceive intentionality from the standpoint that the environment invites certain attitudes, offers resources, or opposes obstacles. Finally, we must subject these propositions to a double critique, which we call phenomenological and ecological.

On the one hand, this set of proposals must be subjected to a phenomenological critique in order to purge it of its residual objectivism. On the other hand, doesn't the notion of environment refer precisely to what is 'around the self'? Finally, we propose to decentre the notion of environment by relying on the notion of 風土 constructed by Watsuji. It is a question of making this dimension of being situated in a milieu which characterises human existence more concrete. Watsuji gives us resources to consider the environment from a phenomenological point of view. The natural sciences approach the environment as a set of natural phenomena; for instance the geographical characteristics of the desert. Watsuji, on the other hand, seeks to recover the particular experience of the desert in its human meaning as an uninhabited world. The notion of 風土 thus allows us to think of a living milieu that, on the one hand, is not reduced to physical characteristics, and, on the other hand, is not ego-centred. From the standpoint of this intersection between the lessons of contemporary phenomenology and the reading of certain Japanese philosophers, we seek to shed light on the way in which the relationship to the environment conceived in a renewed manner as 風土 structures human perception and existence.