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Phenomenology and the Primacy of the Political

Essays in Honor of Jacques Taminiaux

 Springer

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Introduction

This volume has the twofold objective of providing a forum for a contemporary discussion of the primacy of the political within phenomenology and of offering a *Festschrift* in honor of Jacques Taminiaux. Although distinct, these objectives support each other, in that Taminiaux’s own intellectual itinerary brought him increasingly to an affirmation of the irrecusable importance of the political.

The phrase “the primacy of the political” echoes the “primacy of perception” as it was famously defined by Merleau-Ponty (1989). But what we want to stress is not the “foundational” character of the political, but rather its inescapability, that is, the fact that almost any sort of philosophical research, whatever its specific object, will find itself confronted by the mirror of the political. The metaphor of the mirror is here particularly suggestive,¹ for we mean to explore the ways in which various itineraries of thought, explored in different fields of phenomenological research, give rise to politically relevant reflections. For this reason, the “primacy of the political” will not be, first and foremost, confirmed by studies with a direct focus on the political dimension. Likewise, it would be inappropriate to limit the scope of our inquiry to an explicitly political discussion, such as phenomenological appropriations of Arendt’s or Schutz’s thought, or perhaps critical assessments of Heidegger’s political blindness and lapses, as attested to once again by the publication of his *Black Notebooks*, of which three volumes have appeared to date within the *Gesamtausgabe*.

We seek instead to highlight the political import of phenomenological practice. For instance, phenomenological reduction as the main vehicle of phenomenological research needs to be re-examined against the background of the realization that phenomenology cannot espouse the attitude of the uninvolved spectator but must enact a fundamental attitude of judgment and respect. Likewise, phenomenological aesthetics—no matter whether its focus is trained on literature, the visual or performing arts, or elsewhere—cannot exempt itself from being reflected in the mirror of the political, for poetics and politics are mutually entangled. Strong political connotations also haunt the phenomenological sense of concepts such as world, self, nature, intersubjectivity, or language, even though at first sight these may seem to be

¹For its use in Merleau-Ponty, see for instance: Merleau-Ponty (1964), 181, 303.

politically neutral. This volume seeks therefore to point out and elucidate such political connotations, tracing them to a broad range of approaches, concepts, and methods, and therefore also to an inclusive range of thinkers, including, but not limited to, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Arendt. We hope to clarify why phenomenology, as a contemporary framework of thought, remains uniquely capable of indicating the range of “hermeneutical links (*maillons herméneutiques*),” to use Taminiiaux’s expression,² that reveal the philosophical irrecusability of the political dimension of life and thought.³

This volume is organized in four sections which engage with different aspects of the political dimension of phenomenology, aspects that may also overlap in complex ways. The First Section, “Reading the History of Political Philosophy,” focuses on classic political texts from Aristotle to contemporary thinkers, though it goes without saying that Aristotle’s and Kant’s intellectual perspectives remain prominently in focus throughout the volume. It attempts to show how the phenomenological tradition engages with its prefigurations in the history of thought and brings classical philosophical texts into conversation with phenomenological themes.

In “The Struggle for Recognition and the Return of Primary Intersubjectivity,” Shaun Gallagher re-examines the issue of intersubjectivity in its political dimension, by analyzing Axel Honneth’s understanding of the distinction between primary and secondary intersubjectivity. To bring to light the implications of this distinction, he offers a brief hermeneutical tracing of the concept of recognition, beginning with Fichte, and following a few twists and turns through Hegel, Honneth, and Ricoeur. His main thesis is that we should abandon the model of perfectly reciprocal recognition achievable by a dialectical struggle that would lead beyond an imagined non-differentiation to well-defined individuality and then onward to a utopian politico-economic justice. Rather, we should opt for a model of primary intersubjectivity which is concomitant with imperfect relations that sometimes require giving recognition and sometimes require receiving forgiveness or living with the fact that there can be no repayment.

Fabio Ciaramelli, in “Intuition and Unanimity. From the Platonic Bias to the Phenomenology of the Political,” offers a fresh phenomenological reading of a classic text of modern political theory, namely, the mid-sixteenth-century *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* by Etienne de La Boétie, universally known because it denounces political subordination to the power of the One. Ciaramelli detects in this text the traces of the metaphysical privilege of intellectual intuition and of its political implications, such as they have also been pointed out by Arendt and emphasized by Taminiiaux. The seduction of unanimity and the appeal of immediacy are both present in La Boétie’s text; a sort of Platonic bias drifts to unanimous solutions in the social and political field and to the repression of plurality in the name of a certain totality. La Boétie’s theory is presented as a prominent example of the puzzles

²See Taminiiaux (2009), 7.

³The present volume intersects with a number of studies which either lack its inclusiveness or propose an analysis of the political realm as such, not an analysis of how political considerations permeate phenomenological research (e.g., Villa (1999); Thompson and Embree (2000); Gurley and Pfeifer (2016); Jung and Embree (2016)).

and the hazards contemporary political philosophy still faces, and Ciaramelli's reading is meant to show why the heirs of Arendt's legacy are less prone to succumbing to these hazards.

In "*Phronêsis* and the ideal of Beauty," Danielle Lories revisits two classic texts of political thought: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Kant's *Third Critique*. These are examined together on the basis of Arendt's interlinkings of Aristotelian *phronêsis* with the Kantian judgment of taste. Lories attempts to explore this affinity by putting to test the hypothesis that a brief passage of the *Critique of Judgment*, namely §17, may contribute to understanding one particular problem that Aristotle's discussion of *phronêsis* in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* poses for politics. In the relevant text, Kant describes—from a psychological, that is to say, non-transcendental, point of view—the mental process by which the judging subject obtains an ideal of beauty relevant to the human face. Lories' study is to be read as an attempt to explore and corroborate Arendt's suggestions in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.

The Second Section, "Political Facets of Phenomenology," turns to well-known phenomenological texts—other than Arendt's political writings which are discussed in the next two sections—to bring to light their hidden political implications. It suggests that Heidegger, Husserl, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty provide us with valuable indications concerning the political realm, even though they did not themselves articulate a unitary and fully elaborated political philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's contribution might be the most suggestive at this juncture, since it is not in his political writings that one will find his most interesting and phenomenologically inspired perspective on the political, but also where one may not look for it; for instance, in his treatment of phenomenological reduction or in his analyses of perception and embodiment.

In "The Ethical Dimension of Transcendental Reduction," Rosemary R.P. Lerner starts out from Taminaux's investigations on the relation between *poiêsis* and *praxis* to bring into view the ethical dimension of Husserl's transcendental reduction. Lerner presents phenomenological reduction as an eminently practical, and thus ethical, accomplishment, driven by the virtue of responsibility. To this aim, Lerner, on the one hand, pays attention to published and unpublished material attesting to Husserl's commitment to the primacy of the ethical. On the other hand, she seeks to explain the ethical stakes of phenomenological reduction with a view to both its motivation and its objectives. She argues that the reduction has significant ethical import, in that it yields lucidity concerning one's fundamental "sense-constituting activity." In conclusion, she points out a critical change in our ethical attitude which is consequent upon performing the phenomenological reduction.

In "Individuation and Heidegger's Ontological Intuitionism," Mark A. Wrathall builds on Taminaux's thesis that Heidegger is an intuitionist and on his account of the way Heidegger takes up Husserl's notion of categorial intuition so as to arrive at a considerably broadened notion of what can be intuited—broader than what can be found in the post-Humean Anglo-American tradition. But Heidegger does more than simply expand the range of "objects" of intuition. He also, Wrathall suggests, develops a rich account of different ways of seeing, undercutting the priority accorded to focal seeing. To grasp Heideggerian authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*),

Wrathall argues, we need to develop more systematically both the kind of “object” and the way of seeing that makes for transparency (*Durchsichtigkeit*) and to explain its substantive role in our becoming individuals. Doing so leads to a fresh understanding of the nature of individuation and to a better understanding of authenticity.

In “Gadamer’s Historicizing of the Mind,” Pol Vandavelde points out that both Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson seek to do justice to the political character of interpretation and recognize the primacy of *ethos* over *logos*. Whereas for Gadamer understanding is reached dialogically and is profoundly indebted to language and history, for Davidson, it is reached through an a-historical, causally based, and empirical process of interpretation, with language functioning as a mere tool. Moreover, whereas the “happening” of understanding is, for Gadamer, ontologically basic to human existence, Davidson’s process of interpretive “triangulation” negotiates quasi-mechanically between the subjective, objective, and intersubjective positions, none of which can claim priority. Although Davidson’s theory can be perceived, from a certain perspective, to have the advantages of bypassing language as well as neutralizing potential relativism, it threatens, so Vandavelde argues, with an absolutization of the dominant view, while it also depersonalizes the concrete historical individuals who accomplish interpretation. Its quasi-mechanistic neutrality thus reveals itself politically and distressingly as ethnocentric or even imperialistic.

In “On the Metamorphoses of Transcendental Reduction: Merleau-Ponty and ‘The Adventures of Constitutive Analysis’,” Stephen Watson offers a meditation on Merleau-Ponty’s acknowledgment of the necessary incompleteness of the reduction. As Watson shows, this incompleteness is not an unsurpassable failure fully to grasp an originary self-evidence, but attests rather to the inexhaustible transformations involved in the work of making origins manifest. Watson discusses the link between this realization and Merleau-Ponty’s ultimate rejection of a tacit *cogito* as still indebted (in its disregard for language) to an ideal of cognitive coincidence, and thus to a philosophy of consciousness. As the late Merleau-Ponty himself puts it, “the originary breaks open.” In consequence of this insight (richly spelled out in its motivations and implications by Watson), phenomenology itself becomes an open practice of plurivocal institution.

Babette Babich, in “Merleau-Ponty’s Lamellae: Aesthetic Feeling, Anger, and Politics,” draws on the full scope of Merleau-Ponty’s thought—and its dialogues with a spectrum of interlocutors—to reveal, firstly, its sustained engagement with the sciences (particularly, psychology and biology) and, more fundamentally, its “crystallography in words.” Articulating one’s bodily engagement with the life-world, his phenomenology traces dimensionalities, depth strata, spacings, and lamellae within a multi-faceted topography that is ultimately the true site of thought. It is also the site of intercorporeal life, for instance, of the “electric tension” and flare-ups of anger. Babich concludes with a trenchant meditation on the relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s *Humanism and Terror* to an understanding of current political crises, stressing his warning against pursuing inhuman violence, imperialism, and capitalist exploitation of animal and natural resources as well as of labor under the rhetorical disguise of noble ideals.

The Third Section, “Phenomenology in Political Concreteness,” seeks to forestall some possible objections against the supposedly purely theoretical character of phenomenological analysis. Phenomenological praxis—be it reduction itself or its wider implications—seems not to be practical in the strict sense of the term. The most cogent and direct reply to such objections is to show how one can draw on phenomenological concepts and insights to make valuable contributions to the discourse concerning much-debated and compelling socio-political issues. The contributions of this section should, then, be considered as case studies.

Sharon Rider, in “Coercion by Necessity or Comprehensive Responsibility? Hannah Arendt on Vulnerability, Freedom and Education,” explores Arendt’s arguments in *Between Past and Future* in the perspective of the philosophy of education. In particular, she envisages a number of changes in current ideas about thinking, learning, and judging, and tries to understand the idea of an “institution of truth” as something conceivable and perhaps even viable within the present political context. The alleged antinomy between authority and freedom and its connection to specific historical conditions of the institutions of education is what Rider investigates. She thereby takes a stance against current trends in “progressive education” that either glorify a false image of children’s autonomy or set up a supposed science of teaching purely as teaching, detached from the mastery of any specific subject matter.

In “Edmund Husserl, Hannah Arendt, and a Phenomenology of Nature,” Janet Donohoe draws on phenomenological insights to address issues of earth ethics and animal ethics in dialogue with contemporary thinkers, such as Kelly Oliver. Starting from Husserl’s distinctions between lifeworld, homeworld, and alienworld, she teases out the ways in which phenomenology and Arendt’s insights can help us to understand nature not as something over against which we define ourselves, nor as being entirely self-contained, but rather as that with which we are intimately intertwined and without which we are nothing. The objective of this analysis is to provide us with new conceptual tools to revisit animal ethics in its political implications.

Paul Bruno, in “Symbols and Politics,” takes inspiration from two incidents on the campus of Framingham State University in Massachusetts that had provoked fierce debates about the Confederate Flag. What is intriguing to Bruno is that the incidents pivot on the issue of what constitutes a symbol. Since symbol is the purview of aesthetics, he proposes as a point of entry to this political discussion a preliminary excursus of symbols in aesthetic experience. Aesthetics addresses art, but, more broadly, it is concerned with the meanings of objects as they present themselves to humans, which is to say, as they present themselves to historical beings who live in language. Bruno explores these themes on the basis of a phenomenological reading of Kant’s concepts of symbol and imagination as developed in the *Third Critique* but also in their impact on critical thinking in general.

The Fourth Section, “The Political Vision of Taminiaux’s Phenomenology,” offers a critical appraisal of Taminiaux’s own engagement with the political. Although the importance of Taminiaux’s work is recognized internationally, his contribution to the phenomenology of the political has not been explicitly addressed in the scholarly literature prior to this volume. It thus constitutes a suitable focus for the final (and forward-looking) section of this *Festschrift*, all of whose contributors have, at some stage of their professional development, worked under Taminiaux’s

guidance. At the same time, it offers an exploration of intertwining, if different, approaches to the political, given that Taminiaux's thought relies on both exacting and insightful readings of the history of philosophy and on original and challenging confrontations with phenomenological thinkers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Arendt.

In "Poetics and Politics," Françoise Dastur traces the complex itineraries of Taminiaux's political thought by examining his interpretation of tragedy from his first landmark book *La Nostalgie de la Grèce à l'aube de l'idéalisme allemand* (1967) to his well-known turn to Arendt, exemplified by *Le théâtre des philosophes* (1995). Dastur praises Taminiaux for his insistence on highlighting the connection between poetics and politics from Aristotle to German Idealism and to Heidegger's successive efforts to analyze the work of art. However, she is also critical of Taminiaux's distinction between praxeological and speculative readings of Greek tragedy and of the notion of the political that they imply. In particular, she wonders whether a merely praxeological approach to tragedy does justice to its multiple speculative aspects and makes room also for its Dionysian element. Dastur interrogates the very core of Taminiaux's thesis according to which poetics and politics are, as it were, just two sides of the same coin.

Given the importance of Merleau-Ponty's thought for Taminiaux, Véronique M. Fóti, in "Nature, Art, and the Primacy of the Political: Reading Taminiaux with Merleau-Ponty," argues that the philosophy of nature is indissociable from an understanding of the primacy of the political. In his three late lecture courses on Nature, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the failure of efforts at an intellectual subjugation of nature as well as the kinship of an understanding of nature with the thought of radical contingency. In the first Nature course (1956–1957), he takes up the thought of Whitehead to envisage an "ether of events" refractory to any unique spatio-temporal emplacement—as well as to any privilege of mind over the process character of manifestation. In Merleau-Ponty's tracings of the "inter-being" of self and other, or the intercorporeality of animal being and humanity (referred to as "inter-animality" in the Nature courses), the emphasis on lateral rather than hierarchical relationships repudiates structures of domination. The study's final focus is trained on the interrelation between political philosophy and the philosophy of art, and, in particular, on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of institution in its difference from Heidegger's *Stiftung*.

In "The Myth of Performativity: from Aristotle to Arendt and Taminiaux," Pavlos Kontos argues for the bold claim that Taminiaux's concern throughout his work remains one and the same, namely, to alert us to the politically dangerous attractions of the "Myth of Performativity." By the "Myth of Performativity," Kontos understands the conception according to which actions constitute pure performances that do not leave behind them concrete traces in the world. The Myth becomes a pitfall for philosophers—such as Heidegger and even some contemporary phenomenologists—once one distorts the performativity proper to actions and, instead, celebrates *pure* performativity. Notwithstanding his critique of what he considers to be both Arendt's and Taminiaux's misreading of Aristotle's ethics and politics, Kontos is appreciative of Taminiaux's understanding of political action, for Taminiaux

casts doubt on the legitimacy of the Myth and the way it misuses the politically critical notions of solidity, power, and memory.

To use the very last words of his *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel*, words that Taminiaux addresses to us with regard to Arendt's legacy, "we cannot go about as though [Taminiaux] had not spoken."⁴

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⁴Taminiaux (1992), 246 [as it appears in Taminiaux (1997), 197.]