

Between Phenomenology and Realism

The Problem of Givenness in Jocelyn Benoist¹

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Reception date: 18-05-2025

Acceptance date: 28-07-2025

Abstract: In Jocelyn Benoist's work, phenomenology occupies a central place, serving as the foundation of his philosophical investigations and, ultimately, of his most current theoretical propositions and criticisms. It is curious that phenomenology gradually changes within his thought without ever ceasing to occupy a central place in it. From methodological principle, it becomes a quite strong target of their criticisms. In this paper, we will reconstruct these criticisms that, on one hand, demonstrate the fertility that phenomenology has in philosophy and, on the other hand, the resistance it offers to continue the investigations of the relation between perception and reality (on what we called the Benoist vicious circle of intentionality). While Benoist questions phenomenology in its conceptual framework, it is phenomenology that imposes a very arduous challenge to the philosopher so that he may, after all, understand our relationship with the world in other terms, so important and renewed to him.

Keywords: Benoist; Husserl; Merleau-Ponty; perception; reality

1. The problem of givenness

We begin with the insight that Jocelyn Benoist himself claims to have had in the early 2000s. While taking the subway with Charles Travis, the latter asked him: Why, after all, must perception be intentional? Why must it “aim at” or “reach” the perceived, if in perceiving we already “have” the thing, by definition? In short, why establish this distance between the gaze and that which it sees, only to ultimately account for its possible proximity? The philosophical work that Benoist has been developing – especially since the beginning of this century, following his extensive formative studies on Husserl and Kant – seeks to respond to this series of questions and enigma in a very particular way. Because it constitutes a complete reversal of

¹ A modified version of this paper was originally published in *Ekstasis* (Rio de Janeiro), called “Jocelyn Benoist nos limites da fenomenologia: percepção, doação, realidade”, v. 11, n. 2: 44–72. I would like to thank Jocelyn Benoist for the valuable conversations regarding the themes addressed in this new version of the paper. Also, I am grateful to the PPGFIL at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais and to my supervisor, Alice Mara Serra, for her constant help with this research. Finally, this work was supported by CAPES through process No. 88881.243255/2025-01.

the problem of perception, one that denies the very foundations of phenomenology. Let us quote him: “we must then invert the point of view of phenomenology – turn it, so to speak, ‘upside down’, as Marx does in relation to Hegel – and, each time, begin from that which is given itself.” (Benoist, 2010: 25).

In recent years, Benoist has unfolded an examination of strict phenomenology – which is of particular interest here – alongside a systematic reading of phenomenology in a broader sense, from Anaxagoras to Husserl and the phenomenological thinkers. This involves tracing the steps taken since the Platonic retrieval of the term “phenomenon”, from Anaxagoras which for the first time invests it with a philosophical meaning. While the verb “to appear” in its original pre-Socratic usage merely refers to contextual conditions – such as place, time, or the individual to whom something appears – Plato proposes a properly conceptual usage, whereby “appearance” comes to qualify an entire class of experiences. Thus, if the first occurrence of the term does not constitute a proper study, nor could it justify one, it is because “there is only phenomenon according to a norm which has, in itself, nothing ‘phenomenal’ about it” (Benoist, 2016: 184). Plato, then, does not merely catalogue the term but renders it necessary for the consideration of any state of affairs. What we would call “phenomenal”. At the same time, he is the one who “institutes the possibility” (Benoist, 2016: 59) of phenomenology itself.

Let us start with that. In Benoist’s reading, philosophy as a whole is both confronted with and starts with some space proper to phenomenality. To do so, however, philosophy must forget its own nominal inauguration. That philosophy is “Platonic” is therefore an inevitable consequence, since all of it can be said to be “phenomenological” in the broad sense, from the moment *The Republic* established an equivalence between the sensible and appearance. Its strict and explicit meaning, however, clearly comes from Husserl, who deliberately *constructs* phenomenology. It is this Husserlian project that mobilizes many of Benoist’s writings and it is also the basis of his main argument against it, which is our focus here: namely, that *the sensible does not equate to appearance*.

Something astonishing – because it may seem like a relapse into the very dogmatism that phenomenology claims has compromised numerous theories, both those preceding and those following it. Perhaps a stubborn return of ontology, and of the discourse about reality as we see and live it, without the subjective. The so-called “natural orientation” or “natural attitude”. The old passion for being. But caution is needed. For although appearance is always *perceived*, it does not follow that every perception has the structure of *appearance*, or, in the author’s view, that it effectively constitutes what might be called a *phenomenon*. The point, to begin, is not

perception or sensible experience, but rather questioning the presumed unity of a *phenomenology of perception*. Certain perceptions have the power of *phenomena* and appear in some manner, while there is no phenomenon that is not, to some extent, perceptual. The same applies to the omnipresent and supposedly neutral notion of *meaning* (*sens*), since perception must in some way render it possible. The proposal, then, is to “think sense as downstream [*en aval*], as made of the sensible, and not upstream [*en amont*] – no longer the sensible as the realization of a sense, which has always been the equation of the philosophical concept of ‘perception’” (Benoist, 2013: 237). With regard to phenomenology, the “real question” is to know what in perception can and must be described in intentional terms, “that which quite simply makes no sense to describe in such terms” (Benoist, 2018: 293). To follow the path laid out by the author, then, we turn to the problem (and the myth) of the *given* – that which appears, after all.

2. A dual mythology

There are several ways of approaching Benoist’s work, due, primarily, to the range of themes and authors he engages – across the much-discussed analytic–continental quarrel, thinking about the originality of these analyses regarding the relationship between perception, world, and reality. He develops an inventive ontology, termed *contextual realism*, as long as one emphasizes the weight the second term bears on the first. If it is reality that is at stake, it is only through context that it produces any effect upon us. This contextual dynamic reveals its grounding in the phenomenological foundations that have occupied most of his books and essays. We argue that the most productive – both pedagogically and conceptually – is through phenomenology, or more precisely, through its limits, by way of the notions of the *given* and *givenness*, which Benoist considers the product of mythological concepts that must be denounced and criticized.

The discussion around the “myth of the given,” formulated by Sellars and influential in epistemological debates of the second half of the 20th century, begins with the empiricist thesis (still neither phenomenological nor critical) that knowledge originates in an experience that is minimally autonomous in order to serve as a foundation for philosophical thought. The given, in itself, whether sensory (sensory data) or internal (introspective), is posited as prior to the judgments and is presented as such to the knowing subject. Sellars directs his suspicion toward

the existence of such a given and its presence to consciousness, without it being, in any way, elaborated by language at the categorical and conceptual level, or even by subjective constraints, concerning context, culture, memory, etc. *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* can even be read as a philosophical manifesto, offering a cascade of critiques against the idea that something (the given) exists and can be known as such, but these criticisms can be summarized as follows:

At this point, it is clear, the concept – or, as I have put it, the myth – of the given is being invoked to explain the possibility of a direct account of immediate experience. [...] Actually there are various forms taken by the myth of the given in this connection, depending on other philosophical commitments. But they all have in common the idea that the awareness of certain *sorts* – and by “sorts” I have in mind, in the first instance, determinate sense repeatables – is a primordial, non-problematic feature of “immediate experience” (Sellars, 1997: 58-59)

This critique is radicalized in its Kantian sense by one of Benoist’s interlocutors, John McDowell: “The Myth, in the version I have introduced, is the idea that sensibility by itself could make things available for the sort of cognition that draws on the subject’s rational powers” (McDowell, 2008: 2). While Sellars rejects any attempt to ground knowledge in a self-sufficient given, McDowell emphasizes the impossibility of admitting any experience that is not mediated or filtered by thought. The point is that sensibility cannot apprehend, by itself, any kind of evident given, since understanding already clothes it in a conceptual way. The critique shifts toward the *sensible* given, so that every data must necessarily surpass cognition to be, after all, given. Accordingly, the critique of foundationalism would have as its positive outcome the admission that all experience passes through this conceptual machinery. But the solution is not skeptical, for in McDowell’s view, it results in strong conceptualism. It is a matter of “avoiding” the “Myth of the Given” and not succumbing to it, through the very critique mounted by Sellars, but also going beyond it, around the “capacities that belong to reason to be operative in experiencing itself” (McDowell, 2008: 3).

The problem does not lie in claiming that things are given to us *so that* we may know them, but in the idea that this self-proclaimed given could somehow affect knowledge, thus becoming a given in the strong and mythological sense. This transition between a negative critical task and a positive philosophical proposition marks the recovery of the “Myth of the Given” in the contemporary debate by both McDowell and Benoist. Whereas for the former, the unveiling of this mythology occurs in favor of a transcendental philosophy, for the latter,

the critique proves to be more potent than initially assumed. It expands from the empirical to the transcendental, in an extension implied by itself, since it strikes much further than its originally intended target.

Benoist argues that it is necessary to review something of the current version of the debate concerning the given. He aims to assess the “residual Kantianism” (Benoist, 2012: 529) in McDowell, who is widely recognized for his strongly conceptualist position (so to say, there is a necessarily conceptual character of all and any content of experience). And he does so in a more radical way than Kant himself, insofar as intuitive givenness is not even something to be preserved in its minimal sensible character, since, if it presents something to the subject, it does so immediately in accordance with conceptual capacities that belong to him. Without delving into the broader debate around conceptualism and its possible opponents – particularly, as we shall see, with Merleau-Ponty – it is important to note that Benoist considers such a view reductive in relation to the very issue it seeks to elucidate. Because if every intuitive content is, immediately, a thought, the distinction between perceptual and conceptual activity dissolves. In the absence of something that we could regard as perceptual, there would no longer be any reason to speak of a perceived thing, according to Benoist, except in a “redundant” and “useless” sense (Benoist, 2012: 529), merely to designate the thing thought or known. However, if it still makes sense to speak of subjective “intuition” or “perception” it is because it possesses its own content, and demands a study and consideration that properly account for it. This is precisely the task of phenomenology: “Intuition – if such a thing exists”, Benoist writes, “is not blind”, “it is simply what it is: a dimension of reality itself” (Benoist, 2012: 529). Thus, it is not empiricism alone, but transcendental philosophy itself that is threatened by a congenital mythology, since, by relying solely on the critique of empirical givenness, one takes the risk of falling into another myth – that of the “givenness of thought” – as Benoist accuses McDowell of doing in his *Mythe du donné, mythe de la pensée* (Benoist, 2012). If the sensible is not immediate this does not necessarily entail that it is a thought or a concept. For this reason, as we shall see, Benoist seeks to trace a genesis of the concept starting from perception.

Then the necessity of recurring to phenomenology. By rehabilitating a deeper meaning of intuition – which will in fact allow for both its sensible and categorial forms, already present in Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* – phenomenology develops the question of givenness according to principles that are not entirely Kantian, nor reducible to any debt of conceptualism to Kant. Likewise, the notion of the given is also transformed, since it is *intentionality* that becomes the key concept through which the relation of meaning – and, possibly, the

mythological character it may bear – will henceforth be understood. It is necessary to grasp how phenomenology “realizes” this adventure of the given, standing as the conceptual pinnacle for such a notion.

3. The grammar of the phenomenon

The notion of *givenness* originates within phenomenology, as thematized and criticized by Benoist in works like *Critique du donné* (2010) and *Logique du phénomène* (2016). *Givenness* involves a process of “degrammaticalization” of the conditions under which it can occur, entailing a triadic structure – a) a subject who gives b) something to c) someone –, conditions that one can trace back to Anaxagoras and even to the subsequent phenomenological tradition, where each of these grammatical aspects are gradually abstracted. As a result, an anonymous givenness is conceived, so that a) the personal subject responsible for giving becomes unnecessary at its foundation. On the contrary, he is more a consequence of the givenness than its condition. The pinnacle of this position can be found in Jean-Luc Marion, precisely in his polemic with Dominique Janicaud regarding the “theological turn” in French phenomenology when it advocates for the autonomy of appearing. However, we believe that it can already be found in the anonymous trace of perception well exposed by Merleau-Ponty. At any rate, at this first moment of degrammaticalization, the properly phenomenological given becomes a given “that is not given by anyone” (Benoist, 2010: 12).

Next, a relative degrammaticalization occurs regarding c) the one who is supposed to “receive” its content, such that phenomenology is freed from any sociological aspect of the “gift”, seeking to thematize a giving in general, without the immediate or real implications of the receiver (Benoist, 2010: 13-14). We can’t forget that there remains always someone who receives the given, whether it be an anonymous consciousness like the lived body (Merleau-Ponty), the transcendental Ego (Husserl), Dasein (Heidegger), or the subject for-itself (Sartre). However, to Benoist, phenomenology always makes this receptive instance absolute, fulfilling the desocialization of the notion of giving (the social aspect persists only as its regional unfolding). Thus there is a *relativization* of the given in relation to this receptive instance, which ultimately leads to a degrammaticalization also of b) what is given.

Nonetheless we can acknowledge that there is a certain difficulty in thinking givenness without a given, which compels us to acknowledge that there is at least an object, a content, a

theme conveyed in this process. “Thus, ‘to give’ presupposes that there is something to be given” (Benoist, 2010: 15). But “the phenomenological use of the lexicon of the ‘gift’ largely violates the natural grammar of that lexicon” (Benoist, 2010: 16), not because it advocates a “givenness” without something being “given”, but because the given comes to depend on its givenness. In this context, what matters most is the givenness of the given (the *manner* in which it is given), rather than the being of the given (its possible *reality*). The given in the usual sense, as “being-given”, becomes a possible unfolding of the given in a more general, denaturalized, and degrammaticalized sense – precisely in the well-known version of the “irreal object” or “noema” through which Husserlian phenomenology seeks to ground its foundations.

The circle is closed. And it is precisely here that the problem lies, according to Benoist. With the achievement of a proper notion of the given – resulting from a reformulation that is de-ontologized, denaturalized, and degrammaticalized – phenomenology finds itself entangled in a difficulty: how can one reach this given, simply given? This difficulty concerning *accessibility* is a legitimate one, and, according to the critic, it reaches its peak within the very doctrine. Phenomenology seeks to (i) guarantee access to something that it simultaneously regards as (ii) self-evident, available, and apprehended as such. This is the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of the notion of the given. “On the one hand [...] in perception, it is precisely *reality itself* that is given [...]; and on the other hand [...] this very reality is *truly given* there, as though this ipseity had to be justified”, such that “phenomenology finds itself essentially suspended between the acceptance of a simple self-evidence [...] and the attempt to *demonstrate its very possibility*” (Benoist, 2013: 33).

How can one account for this ambiguity between distance and proximity, of a given “in person” [*Leibhaftigkeit*] in its “original” form [*Originaliter*], which nevertheless must be reached in order to be, ultimately, “given”? Intentionality arises, in the middle of a theory that seeks to account for the given and its givenness *tout de même* within the consciousness we have of it. But it is precisely here that it generates a new, more consequential – and thus more significant – version of the myth of the given.

This version relies on a reduplication of the distance between thought and object. They are not understood as an object in-itself and a subject for-itself, but rather as the very intentional distance between the consciousness that intends and the consciousness that apprehends and is fulfilled, or, more simply, between what is intended and what is given. Thus the relation is secured within the gap of a familiarity between the given and the intended, which constitutes the very path of its phenomenalization. Nevertheless, we cannot forget that this given still needs

“to be given”, which does not cancel the initial distance between them, but at the same time already presupposes that such distance can be overcome. Benoist immediately advances the impasse that inhabits this duplication and solution point: “the difficulty with such an approach is that it may seem to create entirely the problem it aims to solve” (Benoist, 2010: 523), since the doctrine of intentionality posits (i) a distance and intentionality itself appear as the (ii) tool to overcome it.

What is unconvincing about the notion of the “given” is that it begins by placing at a distance the very thing it claims to guarantee our access to, and invites us to think of this access only from the perspective of that distance – precisely, as the result of a phenomenalization. (Benoist, 2010: 523)

This is a particularly subtle and elegant component of Benoist’s critique: if the thing itself must be given or transposed in its constitutive distance by phenomenalization, it turns out to be both (i) what guarantees the relation and (ii) what is attained through that relation. This results in a kind of aporia within phenomenological discourse, in which the given must be “already given” in order to be “given” (Benoist, 2012: 523). Such a vicious circle is concealed beneath the notion of intentionality, insofar as intentionality is taken to be logically and ontologically primary, rather than a construction of the phenomenologist: “the separation appears to be a reality, and not a mere theoretical construction”. This apparent divergence between the thing and its perceptual apprehension “seems indeed to unfold the interval of a givenness, of a manifestation” (Benoist, 2012: 524), such that it is this very donation that comes to subsume the divergence that it itself has produced. Well, such a resolution of the problem is necessary as is the arbitrariness of the question itself: like a politician who digs holes in public roads only to claim that he is the one capable of filling them.

This highly nominal critique is strong, and Benoist aims it against phenomenology. It has a series of *steps* outlined here, because we aim to provide a thread through which his texts may be received: there exists an ambiguity between the terms *donation* and *self-donation*, *givenness* and *self-givenness* (“donation in person”) (Benoist, 2010), according to which the thing must already be present, already given, in order, ultimately, to be “given” and apprehended (Benoist, 2012). Phenomenology seeks to endorse a type of relation that, nevertheless, does not require mediation (Benoist, 2013). The description of the given as capable of providing its own jurisdiction, would make it a castle made of sand.

Thus, the given *is* given, but it *needs* to be given. This is a trap! But how can it be overcome? By ceasing to understand perception as a type of *relation*, as a process that connects something (perceived) through a donation to someone (perceiving). As Benoist suggests, perhaps “the notion of ‘relation’ could constitute a rather poor metaphor to describe perception” (Benoist, 2013: 12). Thus this new argument deepens the dialogue with phenomenology. But now, with Merleau-Ponty.

4. The indeterminacy of the given

Although Husserl founded phenomenology, it is Merleau-Ponty who, in Benoist’s view, most significantly advances the debate on perception. In *Le bruit du sensible* (2013), he confesses his long-standing admiration for the author, whom he had followed since his adolescence, yet who had scarcely appeared in his formative or authored writings. Finally, in this book significantly disruptive of his thought¹, it is time to face this unspoken and confidential interlocutor.

In examining Merleau-Ponty, Benoist admits to finding the most forceful position regarding what perception is, as well as the limit beyond which it would be necessary to question the entire intentional analysis and all of phenomenology. This promising perspective in Merleau-Ponty’s position lies in exposing the usual logic of perception as being committed to the concept, through which the neo-Kantian positions of his time, such as those of Brunschvicq, Lachelier, and others, recognized an immediate work of understanding of the perceived. In his words, which we must quote here before reopening the direct debate with Benoist, this tradition made perception “a variety of intellection and, in all that it has of positive, a judgment” (Merleau-Ponty, 1942: 216-217). To be clear, if perception only presents

¹ It is enough to refer to the collection of essays in honor of Benoist, entitled *Du Bruit et du Sensible: Autour de Jocelyn Benoist*, edited by Danielle Cohen-Levinas and Raoul Moati. This volume includes essays and critiques from several prominent figures in phenomenology and the philosophy of perception today, among them the editors themselves, Renaud Barbaras, Dominique Pradelle, and others. From this work, we quote the words of Barbaras, who agrees with Benoist’s overall diagnosis: “I must confess that I am deeply in agreement with the essential aspects of your analyses, particularly with the *pars destruens* of your proposal. In fact, you clarify with unparalleled clarity a discomfort I have felt ever since I began practicing phenomenology and, consequently, working with perception. This discomfort refers to the fact that, in Merleau-Ponty, particularly in his last work, the way in which he approaches and characterizes what he himself calls perception seems to have little to do with what we should understand as perception, with the minimal coordinates of this concept” (Barbaras, 2020: 15). Regarding the *pars construens* of this theory and the differing positions between Barbaras and Benoist, we made it the subject of another study, still unpublished.

something when that “something” is apprehended according to its conceptual form, as an object endowed with configurations pertaining the transcendental apparatus of the one who perceives it, it is because sensitivity in itself is merely a preparation, a “beginning science” for the world itself, which must be apprehended according to this cognitive apparatus of the subject, which completes (and thus gives meaning to) its manifestation.

It is the set of these positions that Merleau-Ponty refers to as “intellectualism” in the debate on perception. McDowell becomes a renewed target of Merleau-Ponty's criticism when the former defends the impossibility of a relation with the world without the mediation of concepts. But phenomenology also has an affiliation with this way of conceiving perception when, instead of advocating an immediate work of the categorical on the sensible, as criticism does, it describes the need for a “giving of meaning” [*Sinngebung*] that imparts a form to the sensory data and, through this operation given with full clarity, allows the way to open to understand each datum from its essential features. Phenomenology is anticipated by this assumption that there is a noetic moment responsible for animating the sensory data and rendering the object as a noematic moment, so that its consistency depends on this giving of meaning. Another version, with all its specificities, of the broad label Merleau-Ponty uses to qualify “intellectualism.” Nonetheless, it is in phenomenology, especially, in relations of meaning that do not depend on this intellectual, noetic, or active donation, that it finds a way to rehabilitate the debate on perception and avoid the very intellectualism to which phenomenology itself had sometimes been drawn.

On the contrary, if Merleau-Ponty defends a perceptive logos, it is precisely to affirm that it is a proto-phenomenon, a science without premises, as criticism has accused it of being, since it already presents things and themes endowed with meaning. At the same time, it prevents the perceived, when apprehended as already endowed with meaning, from having its own meaning fully determined and clearly determined by the subject who perceives it, which limits the transcendental ambition of philosophy in some way. In short, there exists the being perceived; it is the archetype of our relationship with other aspects of reality, in language, nature, culture, and so on; but this *mode of being* has a *positive indeterminacy*, and such excess does not challenge philosophy, but rests as both its limit and its very possibility.

Up to this point, Benoist follows Merleau-Ponty's analysis, and it is not redundant to emphasize that he considers them essential for understanding what perception is. Especially when he combines the phenomenological description with some discoveries of the psychology of his time, particularly in *Gestalt theory*, in favor of this *self-organization* of the perceptual

field. Benoist would also agree with Merleau-Ponty about these contemporary trends in the debate, such as *conjunctivism* and *disjunctivism* (we will return to this), demonstrating how phenomenology still constitutes a fairly consistent paradigm in understanding our relations with the world.

Benoist follows the descriptions of “perceptual constancies”, which seem to receive renewed emphasis in Merleau-Ponty, and are of interest in showing the relationship between perception and normativity. The rediscovery of the perceived world has the merit of demonstrating that there is an antepredicative unity between the perceiver and what is perceived, which precedes the proper predication and, to some extent, remains independent of it. In the constancy of size, for example, the object appears as the “same size” at different distances, without the perceiving subject applying any calculation or concept of identity beyond the multiplicity of lengths. This organization, which does not subsume diversity in favor of identity, but operates within the perceptual variation itself, in favor of its constancy of color, size, weight, can only be a type of meaningful relationship that precedes judgment. Thus, constancy is not an invariant given, either intellectually or in itself in the objective world, but the result of the relationships between the perceiving body and the thing being perceived. Merleau-Ponty thinks that Husserl has pointed to this more fundamental relationship when describing perceptual intentionalities and more original ones than those of acts of consciousness – such as operative intentionality, which “makes the natural and antepredicative unity between the world and our life [...] clearer than in objective knowledge” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: xiii). But what interests Benoist is the more general argument regarding perceptual constancies, which reveals why Merleau-Ponty contrasts the logic of the determined given, supported by judgment and concept, with the assumption that there exists another, more original, indeterminate given of meaning, which is apprehended by the body.

The *Phenomenology of Perception* begins with a famous example. Many consequences are still drawn from it. It concerns the so-called “Müller-Lyer illusion,” in which two lines of the same apparent length appear to change their appearance when arrows are added to their ends (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 12). The line with centrifugal arrows seems longer than the other, which receives centripetal ones, and even though we know they have (or had) the “same” length, they now appear as “unequal” in this new perceptual configuration. The confusion between the fact that they had the same length, but cannot be perceived as such in the new configuration, makes one think of the figure as an “illusion”. But Merleau-Ponty argues that it is not truly an illusion, because the lines, once added with arrows, are not the same segments that were previously

perceived, and it is in perception that this difference not only imposes itself but also reveals the primacy of a type of data irreducible to objective predicates¹. “The two line segments”, we can read, “are neither equal nor unequal; it is in the objective world that this alternative imposes itself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 12), a world in which perceptual constancies, as we have seen, would have to be imposed by determined predicates (the lines are “yellow”, they have the same length of “10 centimeters”, etc.). Now, this example is fundamental for all the argumentation that will follow the next 400 pages of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, for even in the case of the Müller-Lyer lines, it is possible to notice how perception, in itself, cannot be understood according to completely determinable values. Thus, the example is not used merely as an illustration. It opens a new key to understanding the entire world of things as we perceive it, within which “we must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 12).

For Benoist, the description of the line segments has the merit of showing that there is no “equality” or “inequality” in perception, except when we apply a certain *standard* to it, which, according to the author, corresponds to the image of the objective world where lines must be measured and appear either equal or not in length. However, when Merleau-Ponty moves from critique to proposition, Benoist’s reading does not follow him. For the former, it would be a matter of attributing a positive and unpredictable value to this lack of objectivity of the lines, which, if not equal, nor unequal, become “other” in relation to one another: “In the Müller-Lyer illusion, one of the lines ceases to be equal to the other without becoming ‘unequal’: it becomes ‘other’ [*autre*]” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 18). An originary phenomenon, one could say, for it

¹ The discussion about the existence of “perceptual illusions” persists today, even though they are criticized by both Merleau-Ponty and Benoist, albeit in different ways. For Benoist, it concerns the *overlaying* of certain concepts originated in perception, as *perceptual concepts*, onto others that do not seem to correctly describe it. The former function as norms, while the latter are merely cases of verification or deviations from these norms. The characteristics that lie “outside” the norm established by our perceptual concepts are usually referred to as “perceptual illusions”. This is clearly the case with the Müller-Lyer figures, which defy the metrics with which we attempt to understand them, and thus are traditionally considered to be an illusion, or a discrepancy between the way they are seen and the judgments with which we try to classify them. Benoist dedicates several moments in his writings to analyze this fundamental misunderstanding, which consists of trying to find a place for illusion within theories of perception, when in fact it does not exist. Against disjunctivists, who deny that illusion relates to perception and can ultimately be perceived, Benoist responds that it is indeed perceived, and that the so-called “illusion”, like that of Müller-Lyer, but also Zollner, and many others, are perceived. It is only through perception that they can enter the analysis, and we just need concepts to talk about them. Against conjunctivists, who consider the illusion to be something also perceived, Benoist replies that it is not an illusion as such, but a perception that does not align with the concept used to describe it. Thus, there is no crucial difference between perception and illusion, which amounts to rejecting the central thesis of disjunctivism, but this is because there are not “illusions” at all when we perceive, but a discrepancy between the perception and the perceptual concept that seeks to describe it, which also invalidates the central thesis of conjunctionism. “The question is not whether in itself our perception conforms to a norm that defines what there can be (as opposed to what cannot be), but rather how much of the perceived we have incorporated into our definition of that norm” (Benoist, 2021: 76).

presents something that cannot be determined, as an experience in a positive sense. But this is precisely what Benoist rejects, because there is not just the objective determination according to the equality–inequality of length that involves the imposition of a certain norm on perception. No doubt, what Merleau-Ponty calls “indetermination” involves this kind of application, because he is considering objective perception as having this dual-kind of range applied to lines, but when he denies it, he still thinks that they have a meaning, a content (but an “indeterminate” one). The difference lies in the shift between objective content and pre-objective content, determined or determinable according to oppositional predicates, and indeterminate and indeterminable in itself, a crucial difference for Merleau-Ponty’s exposition in favor of what would be the perceptual *logos*, a *logos* “more fundamental than that of objective thought” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 419) or “an art hidden in the depths of the human soul” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 491).

For Benoist, this position suffers from the same flaw as the one it criticizes: attributing a given background to perception, when, in fact, it depends on naming, on establishing a certain norm to evaluate it. The objective norm does not apply in the Müller-Lyer illusion; it is not relevant in that case, but this does not mean that pre-objectivity is not another norm to evaluate it, something that evades all norms. Merleau-Ponty believes that he is descending from the territory of norms into a deeper one attributed to the perceived world. However, if perception necessarily involves norms, according to Benoist, this means that the predicates of equality–inequality do not apply to an example like the lines; but even so, they are not peremptorily unpredictable or indeterminate, as other perceptual concepts distinct from (dis)equality could align with what is perceived in the case at hand.

It is therefore not possible to entirely dismiss the conceptuality of perception unless some ordinary form of evaluation – certainly indispensable to our task of geometric measurement – does not apply universally. Yet this is precisely what Merleau-Ponty does when he argues that, given the fragility in predicating certain lived experience, there is a fundamental impossibility of doing so. So, the being of the perceived would then have to be classified as indeterminate *per se*. As Benoist writes, perception in its actual reality is neither determined nor indeterminate. Thus, in the case of the Müller-Lyer lines, “*prima facie*, the segments do not look ‘the same size’. But do they look as though they are definitely *different* sizes? It is not clear that they do” (Benoist, 2021: 72). For the author, the perceived is that which we see – simply “what is” – and the more or less effective determination according to certain names, and

the indeterminacy we may substitute when that naming fails, already involves an interpretation of perception through what Benoist calls “perceptual” concepts.

One can discern a kind of weak conceptualism alongside this realist approach to perception. Its realist character does not concern us at this moment – especially as it remains in a very interesting development construction and fruitful debate by Benoist – but rather its conceptualist dimension. The fact that certain concepts do not fit well with certain experiences – usually those still regarded, to be thought of as “errors” or “illusions” – does not imply that no concept is capable of articulating them in a more appropriate way. Such a claim would gloss over the discomfort expressed by proponents of a philosophy of lived experience (in some respects akin to conjunctivists, who regard perception and illusion as sharing a common core) and the compensatory stubbornness of epistemologists striving to preserve their objective concepts (in this case, closer to disjunctivists, who sharply distinguish between perception and illusion). Thus, Benoist’s position is very particular: perception is neither determined nor indeterminate. In both cases, there is the same movement toward naming it, expecting it to contain a “content” (whether it conforms to or deviates from a norm that is surreptitiously presupposed). And everything will depend on the concepts available to us for describing something perceived, such as the Müller-Lyer lines, which once were expected to conform to a norm of equality or inequality, *tertium non datur*, otherwise they would be labeled as “illusions”. There seems to be a gap between what we see and the concepts we have at our disposal to speak about what we see. Failing to bridge this gap through determined concepts, would it then be a matter of choosing a constitutive indeterminacy and abandoning the domain of norms, as Merleau-Ponty did? Or rather, does this mean that we can seek another norm – apparently more flexible – which is that of indeterminacy?

In this second case, which norm Merleau-Ponty is using? It seems to mainly come from Gestalt descriptions. Thus, the inclusion of adjacent lines to the two segments, causing the Müller-Lyer illusion, some pointing inward and others outward, leads to the idea that this “other” sense highlighted by the author arises from the consideration of the totality of the perceptual set, which thus supersedes the consideration of its isolated elements. The same occurs in the Zöllner illusion, also considered (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 44), where parallel lines cease to be parallel by the inclusion of small segments along each of them. Thus while elementarism has a certain value in the objective world, the sense of totality is what grounds it and, at the same time, restricts its jurisdiction. Gestalt descriptions find a greater deeper value for understanding lived experience than objective analysis. But, as Merleau-Ponty himself adds

– quite cautiously, moreover – this does not mean that all perception aligns with what Gestalt theory promulgates as law, namely, the relations of figure–ground, superposition, continuity, good form, etc. Rather, because perception is simply like that, because we have the immediate data of perception, given the irreducible and original incarnation of subjectivity in its body and, through it, in the world, this is the motive that makes it possible to describe what we see – forms, composed of figure and ground, as totalities, properties of sets, etc. Thus, on the one hand, “reflecting on Gestalt, the psychologist breaks with psychologism, since the meaning, the connection, the ‘truth’ of the perceived [...] are due to its ‘irreducible configuration’” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 72). But, on the other hand, “if Gestalt can be expressed by an internal law, this law must not be considered as a model according to which structural phenomena would be realized”, since “its appearance is not the unfolding of a preexisting reason in the external world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 74). Therefore, Gestalt serves to describe more effectively what we see, but can never serve as a kind of “perceptual law”, thus replacing the objectification device of the old transcendental consciousness with a new condition of possibility. It is because we perceive, immediately, that the notion of totality from the descriptions of the Gestaltists seems to better encompass the perceived, and not because a configuration of a set serves as a principle for perception.

It may seem that, at this point, the phenomenologist draws closer to Benoist when he comments on perception *in itself* and adds that Gestalt merely sheds light on the way it affects us. Nevertheless, Benoist believes that this is precisely the norm Merleau-Ponty applies to perception. And, of course, he understands the term “norm” in a broader sense. Even a phenomenology that is attentive to the ambiguous and indeterminate dimensions of perception performs a transposition of certain norms onto perception. For the critic, it begins from perception and, under certain conditions, implicitly assumed, asserts that it “appears”, that the perceived is a “given”, and as such, a “phenomenal” given. *But it is precisely this equivalence between perceiving and appearing that becomes the Gordian knot that we put under question.* The task is to uncover the normative root of any discourse on perception, even that seemingly unavoidable approach, which would be descriptive. And even the shift from a phenomenology of knowledge – concerned with the adequacy between categorical determinations and sensible content – to a phenomenology of perception that seeks out a proper *logos* of the “aesthetic world”, which would then decisively escape any objective determination, reintroduces this broader and more primitive dimension of normativity from which perception is always, in some way, conceptualized. As Benoist points out, *it is not because certain concepts fail to describe*

what we see that there are never others capable of doing so more effectively. Rather, it is a strangeness caused by the prevailing concepts in relation to what we see – as in the case of the Müller-Lyer lines – but which does not authorize a general critique of conceptualization in relation to sensible experience. Thus, the aforementioned shift from epistemology to a phenomenology of the sensible world seems to illustrate the assumption of different conceptual limit-cases of what we perceive – in Husserl, the objective formations (*Gegenständlichkeiten*; cf. Husserl, 2001: 520), including objects and quasi-objects; in Merleau-Ponty, the properties of a whole (*Gestalten, Etwas*), such as figure–ground or object–horizon structures. The description of the perceived is no longer anticipated by the paradigmatic case of the object (everything is, in some way, object: in perception, in affections, in idealities or cultural formations, etc.; cf. Husserl, 2013, §26: 96), but rather through the paradigmatic case of totality or Gestalt: “What do we have then at the outset? Not a multiplicity given along with a synthetic apperception which ranges over it and completely penetrates it, but a certain perceptual field against the background of a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: 279).

Let us recall the process of *degrammaticalization* mentioned above, particularly in its positive counterpart: *grammaticalization*. This process occurs when a noun functioning as a substantive or a verb (typically denoting objects or actions) comes to function as an affix (suffix or prefix) or a preposition. In other words, it acquires grammatical value by taking on a specific linguistic *function*. For instance, the term *obiectum*, initially meant “placed before” and thus referred to a particular state of affairs among others. Gradually, it became paradigmatic, used to designate all such states as “objects,” and their properties or qualities as “objective”. The notion of “being in front” becomes not only a thing in itself but also a qualifier of states – *objectivity* as the property of being itself as it continues to stand before us. What was once a particular case becomes the norm. A similar transformation occurs in the grammatical evolution of *phainomenon*, which in Anaxagoras had two specific uses: either “to become visible” or “to resemble” (to appear as something). The term was thus employed in highly specific contexts, far from the generalization it would undergo from Plato onward, with the establishment of a first order of appearance – namely, that of *phenomenality*. Just as with *obiectum*, *phainomenon* comes to designate an entire class of experiences and entities. It ceases to be a case and becomes a norm. This shift, of course, takes place only after the original grammatical usages (in both ancient uses) are *degrammaticalized* and subsequently *regrammaticalized* as the “phenomenon” that we understand in modern philosophy and phenomenology.

Thus, while Husserl still seems to anticipate and reestablish the conceptual possibility of antepredicative data – linking the properly objective formations of active synthesis to the *Gegenständlichen* formations of passive syntheses – Merleau-Ponty seeks a meaning for perceptual content that exceeds the bounds of this theory of evidence. But both involve contents that, in a positive sense, are non-conceptual. The transition remains, nonetheless, conceptual: from one norm to another, each with its specific deviations. Naturally, with good reasons for doing so. Yet, however strong these reasons may be, it appears to us that for Benoist, such reasons will never suffice to demonstrate a real indeterminacy of perception – just that determinability itself was never sufficient, this is not the most important philosophical question. Even though what is at stake here, once again, and beyond phenomenology itself, is the urgent *return to perception*.

From this perspective, it would not be possible to demonstrate an antepredicative origin of predication in the sense of a phenomenology of sensible experience. It would be useless to account for an always incomplete and unfinished determination of the indeterminate character of the sensible as we perceive it. Thus, the project of rooting the categorial attitude in the sensible world and in the body – which stands in contrast to neo-Kantian approaches, including those of some like McDowell – would serve to reveal that the perceived is something wild, though not against the conceptual. However, this precedence of perception must not mislead us. The conceptual norm does not follow as a restrictive foundation, that loses sight of the rawness and richness of perception itself, since it is rather a movement that is always already possible from within it. As Benoist writes, “the idea is no longer of founding the normative (i.e., concepts) in the natural (i.e., abstract chunks of reality), but of *making the experience of the natural itself normative*, insofar as it is drawn upon in the concrete elaboration of concepts” (Benoist, 2021: 148).

5. Meaning and reality

Phenomenology of Perception is the defense of a certain indeterminacy of meaning (we saw an example in the case of the Müller-Lyer lines) alongside a present and given content (the lines themselves within the perceptual whole), culminating in what Benoist characterizes as a problematic “determined indeterminacy” of perception. For indeterminacy to be positively conceived, it must attain the status of a “given” – except that now, this given is taken as pre-

objective. Benoist thus asks: “why does a certain philosophy revolve so insistently around perception and persist in wanting it to be ‘determined’, albeit in a different sense than that of concepts – and thus, from the conceptual point of view, indeterminate?” (Benoist, 2013: 43). Indeterminacy is attained as a half-truth, derived from the determination it claims to surpass but ultimately preserves implicitly, in order then to be able to rest as a given content. Consequently, “this determined indeterminacy then opens the space for a ‘phenomenology’ in a sense that appears, unfortunately, grounded in a *subreption*” (Benoist, 2013: 43). In sum, phenomenology succeeds in revealing the lived root of all naming of concrete experience in relation to its ostensive possibility. Each case would be precisely a case of a norm. Nonetheless, a difficulty remains in linking the perceptual to the conceptual. It becomes clear that for Benoist, phenomenology succeeds in its critique – certain data do not fit well with certain objective concepts – and fails in its conclusion – that such data can *never* be subsumed under concepts. It is right to affirm the “irreducibility of perceived content” (Benoist, 2013: 41) to the conceptual. Yet it is wrong in still treating the perceived as a “content”, even a non-conceptual one – as a content that is merely indeterminate. It continues to posit the perceived as a *sui generis* content, entirely separate from content, but only from the categorical one.

Indeed, the persistent error lies in taking perception to be the bearer of a “content” other than that of concepts, a content which, though different and irreducible to the conceptual, would nonetheless remain a content in the same sense and could thereby constitute an alternative. As if there existed a “non-conceptual content” (that of perception) alongside “conceptual content” (Benoist, 2013: 41).

This logical and substantial exteriority between perception and concept, in the sense upheld by a certain theory of knowledge, and this resistance of the sensible to meaning would be absolute. However, Benoist makes his own return to perception, motivated above all by phenomenology, yet ultimately going beyond it, even though it does not necessarily entail any specific conceptual expression or reappropriation in any given form, is not therefore in opposition to it. This step is crucial, as it not only moves beyond phenomenology but also avoids strong conceptualism, such as that found in positions of a distinctly Kantian lineage.

There is yet another significant point of disagreement with Merleau-Ponty, which follows from the radical and real distinction the phenomenologist posits between the sensible and the conceptual. This position could be traced from his *Phenomenology of Perception* to his later writings, mostly *The Visible and the Invisible*. This is why we have noted that, for Benoist,

Merleau-Ponty continues to operate within the structure of intentional analysis, though now developing a notion of intentionality that is anonymous, passive, and autonomous, one that functions independently of judgment.

The question is whether, once all these reservations have been raised, once its definition as an act, its definition by its supposed object (“the thing”), and its definition by its regional character (the domain of the perceptible versus that which is not) have all been called into question, it is still possible to maintain the concept of “perception” (Benoist, 2013: 212).

It is well known that Merleau-Ponty at times says that, although perception is not language, this silent world seeks expression, seeks to speak, seeks to have expression. He even writes that “language accomplishes, by breaking the silence, what silence wanted and could not achieve” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 227). In this respect, “Merleau-Ponty does not truly overcome the foundational idea of all phenomenology: that of a discourse of experience; on the contrary: he reinforces this discourse, with an exorbitant power, by rendering it silent” (Benoist, 2013: 218).

Thus, it is the very same step that places Benoist at the center of phenomenological investigations and simultaneously at their exit point. According to the author, the only way to escape Merleau-Ponty’s position, the most sophisticated regarding the problem, lies in rejecting the very category of *meaning*. That is, perception has no *meaning* or *sense*; it is not intentional, it is not directed toward anything, regardless of the norm through which this supposed *given* is understood. Rather, perception is *real*, and its reality is the only way to understand it without thereby transforming it into a relation of meaning. Because the “relation” with a real being is of a unique kind: it is not a relation at all, since nothing mediates or interposes itself between the being itself and its apprehension. If the perceived is what it is (real), and if perception is an autonomous (ontological) process, then there is no need to describe how it is possible or how it is actualized. It simply *is*, and it is what *is*: the perception of something real, which we may name as a backpack, a chair, a house, two lines equal or unequal, or different, or even under a new concept, etc. For Benoist, the *sensible* is truly such only if it is not intentional. The sensible aspect of experience is only truly *sensible* if it is not intentional. That is, if it is not directed toward anything, but rather gives us the *thing* immediately.

Therefore, the sensible is foreign to intentionality not because it is inaccessible, but because it is simply what it *is*, something *sensible*, and not *meaning*. For Benoist, “being

sensible” is not the same as “having meaning”, and intentional analysis only grasps the former through the normativity imposed by the latter. Thus, the opacity with which Merleau-Ponty at times characterizes perception in contrast to objective thought introduces a problematic distance within perception itself. Some distance that, according to Benoist, is not resolved even in Merleau-Ponty’s later writings. Because it is a distance that arises in every relation of meaning: between the meaning present in perception and the perception that apprehends this meaning. When Merleau-Ponty assumes that the sensible possesses an autonomous meaning, perception must be thematized as the primordial opening to this meaning. It is the encounter *par excellence*. It is an “encounter”, its meaning is not precisely the sensible itself, such that this *given* (as with every aspect of intentionality) is grounded in a subreption. As long as the sensible possesses an autonomous meaning, perception must be thematized as the primordial openness to this meaning. The encounter *par excellence*, and we quite understand why Merleau-Ponty is important.

Whereas the pre-objective content in Husserl functioned as a preparation for the objectifying act – which then apprehends this content *as X (als ob)* – and, on the other hand, in Merleau-Ponty, insofar as it owed nothing to the active donation of meaning and could dispense with it, for Benoist both positions share a common prejudice. Both remain dependent on a certain version of the *given*, even if, in Merleau-Ponty’s case, this is retained only in its fine details, in his persistent effort to preserve a “meaning” for the sensible and, to conceive perception as a kind of “relation”, from which he still advocates a “*weak form of perceptual intentionalism*” (Benoist, 2013: 13). What is common to both, according to Benoist, is the conception of a constitutive distance in vision. That between the *given* and its *meaning*. In this sense, one could formulate the central question of *The Visible and the Invisible* as follows:

The sensible is precisely this medium in which being can occur without needing to be posited; the sensible appearance of the sensible, the silent persuasion of the sensible, is the only media [*moyens*] through which Being can manifest itself without becoming positivity, without ceasing to be ambiguous and transcendent. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 263–264)

One understands that Being is tied to its manifestation, conceived according to its own characteristics, such as being “sensible”. It is not posited, nor does it have a singular and objective meaning; nevertheless, it still seeks to obtain meaning in order to be what it is: this Being requires the mediation of sensibility. In his critique of the broader notion of “meaning”,

Benoist argues exactly the opposite. Being is already what it *is*, without a *medium*, without the need to possess meaning. This meaning arises from the ways we have to conceive and name it, even those that seem most averse to language, even when the donation of meaning is re-elaborated as a carnal gift, carried out by the body and rooted in the *given* that it reveals. “The fact that one can distinguish an object there is by no means a substantial fact regarding the sensible, but a grammatical fact concerning our ways of identifying objects” (Benoist, 2013: 220-221).

Therefore, Benoist argues that there is a rule in operation within the way Husserl and, subsequently, Merleau-Ponty describe experience in terms of donation. By “rule” he designates a thought responsible for linking the sensible content to an ideal categorical form in perception. But, rather than that, he refers to the simple fact that the phenomenological description of perception is made, and must be made, according to rules (as we have seen, it seems that the “concept” is the norm in McDowell, while the more generic mode is the “object” in Husserl, and the “form” [*Gestalt*] in Merleau-Ponty). Describing is no longer the same as perceiving, even though we must proceed with description in critical work. But what is striking is that, even from this perspective, we arrive at a truism between phenomenology and conceptualization: we perceive the perceived because it is real, because it is what it is, and then we attach a description to it that gives it meaning, which is always normative. When phenomenology equates perception with appearance, we must understand what “appearing” means and whether, in fact, everything perceived “appears” and is a “phenomenon” in terms of perception and the language that describes it. In summary, his position is that *every phenomenon is also perceived*, and “appears” containing perceptual characteristics with which we describe it; but *not everything perceived is a phenomenon*, and therefore, “appears”. We are at the threshold of the realistic reontologization that Benoist proposes for phenomenology.

6. Beyond the given

At first glance, once the primacy of the given is withdrawn, either in its substantive sense (the perceived) or in its verbal sense (perception), there would seem to be nothing left by which to qualify it. We miss the terms still employed by phenomenology. For when we perceive something, there would no longer be any “meaning” (nominal), insofar as there is no “relation of meaning” (verbal) at play. The sensible would not necessarily possess a “meaning”. But

what, then, is at stake when, alongside Benoist, we continue to regard the problem of perception as a crucial one in philosophy?

Outside phenomenology, the perceived is no longer taken as a *given*, not even as a *pre-given* in the sense employed by genetic phenomenology when it probes the passive strata of intentionality. As a *pre-given*, it would be what sustains intentional aiming *as such*. But as a *non-given*, it must, of necessity, *exist*. That is, it must possess an ontological, pre-intentional reality (cf. Benoist, 2010: 24–25).

If the perceived is then part of our concept of the real or at least of one of our concepts of the real, then, it makes no sense to ask whether perception gives us the real, or to interpret this in terms of “givenness”. It gives nothing and, in no sense, is it “given”. It simply is what it is. [...] The perceived does not “give” the thing any more than it is the “given thing”: it is the thing itself, in a certain sense of the word “thing” – one that plays a paradigmatic role in our determination of “things” in general. (Benoist, 2012: 525)

In his *Logique du phénomène*, Benoist points to the challenge faced by contemporary philosophy in dealing with the collapse of the gradual autonomization of appearance. That is a trajectory that runs from Plato to Kant and Husserl. Philosophy has split into three possible paths. One is the phenomenological path, which extends into contemporary phenomenology, and which consists, under various theses, in defending the “autonomization of the plane of phenomena” (Benoist, 2016: 120)¹. Another anti-realist path, stemming from Nietzsche’s

¹ This seems to be true: we do not think it is possible anymore to think phenomenology without normativity. Without normalization or grammaticalization, as Benoist does. However, while phenomenology is necessarily tied to a certain language, Benoist helps us understand the use and stabilization of certain semantic contexts. When we say that we perceive “things” (commonly “identities,” “permanences,” technically “significant nucleuses” or noemata), we are surreptitiously establishing a norm according to which “differences,” “variations,” constitute deviations or mere aspects of them – the most standard of all is that of that *Abschattung* and the role it plays in the *noema*. All language and critical work suffer from and benefit from this same characteristic, implicated in their standardization, because it makes a description. From this perspective, the most pertinent perceptual event is not to notice deviations from the pre-established norm, but trying to erect a case among others as a transcendental rule for perception. Is this even possible? Indeed, the application of “a possibility” of the perceived – the individuated, referential, related to naming, the “totality” of the perceived – could involve other types of non-identitarian, non-referential, sensory, pre-predicative relations, etc., as well as its reciprocal: when identity becomes a derived or transgressive case of difference and variation. However, it is not certain that from this there is a normative root for all that we see when it becomes language, world, and reality, as the author suggests. For Benoist, phenomenization would only consist of a game among others, with rules that are ultimately incommensurable, if it originates from the fact of the world, of being. But even so, it is not necessary to say that this being goes without a *logos* in a general sense (even though it is not exactly the formal, transcendental *logoi* thematized by Husserl, or *prophorikos* or *endiathetos*, in Merleau-Ponty’s famous distinction). Clearly, to phenomenize means to create, deviating from the rule, and to normalize, imposing another rule on future experiences. But this is because, first, we can say that normalization and transgression are experiences – they are lived, possessing their own body and consistency. We believe that the lived experience is primordial here, so that *the relationship between*

critique of the distinction between phenomenon and thing-in-itself, reverses the entire Platonic tradition and, within the framework of perspectivism, asserts itself as a “fundamental *pluralism of interpretations*” (Benoist, 2016: 116). Finally, a realist path begins from the realization that the notion of phenomenality involves the consideration of that which makes it possible and which, as such, does not belong to the order of appearance. This being of the sensible, whose noise cannot be fully articulated by the phenomenon – yet is no less perceived by us – remains undecided. It is indeed a matter of ‘re-ontologizing phenomenology’ (Benoist, 2016: 90), in the form of a realism that does not stand in opposition to it, but rather one from which phenomenology is silently nourished and to which it ultimately invites us. It must be anticipated here, however, that the real in question cannot, obviously, be the one conceived as the counterpart of the phenomenon – as the in-itself – but rather something that sustains it in its very operation, in its intrinsic perspectivism. It is toward *a realism that involves perceptual perspective*, understood as a “contextual realism”, that this new phase of Benoist’s thinking is guiding us.

deviation and norm could not itself be an application of the *norm*, but rather the principal relationship through which everything is made – henceforth phenomenologically noteworthy. Certainly, the *deviation–norm* pair always allows for and generates variations – each with its own “deviations” – the exemplary case in phenomenology being that of the profile and the thing itself, whether at the perceptual, linguistic, or ideal level (for a detailed account of this position, see Andrade, 2022). However, this is due to the fact that the pair itself, extracted from its idiomatic and certainly variable content, is not a “perceptual concept” among others, as Benoist would argue, but something as a “perceptual game”, that is precisely lived as such. This reintroduces phenomenology at the base of an investigation into the normativity and the pragmatic root of our perceptual and linguistic conduct, which, in our view, finds in Benoist’s work the excellence of his critique and formulation, with which it is necessary to pursue dialogue. The continuation of this work will address this theme.

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