

Contemporary Phenomenology Facing the Problems of Modernity

Report from the Debate

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On February 28th, 2025, another of the online debates organized periodically by the Ignatianum University in Cracow took place. The subject of the discussion was the book *Niepewność fenomenu. Fenomenologia w horyzontach nowoczesności* (*The Uncertainty of the Phenomenon. Phenomenology in the Horizons of Modernity*) by Iwona Lorenc (University of Warsaw), published by the University of Warsaw Publishing House in 2024. The book comprises a selection of texts published over the years, which have now been compiled and republished in a new form, in addition to two texts presented for the first time. It demonstrates the post-Heideggerian paradigm of practicing phenomenology, as represented by thinkers such as Patočka, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Barbaras, Dufrenne, Maldiney and Escoubas, among others. This paradigm aims to address the existential situation of the subject in late modernity, characterized by self-criticism, a lack of solid ground, and internal antagonism. The texts contained within Lorenc's book reveal the interplay of tensions between essence and appearance, communal and individualized ways of being in the world, and the normativity of projects and cultural fluidity, demonstrating how contemporary phenomenology intersects with these problem horizons. This constitutes a novel form of phenomenology that counterpoises the universal claims of reason to what transcends its limits, such as the plurality, fragility, or unpredictability of human experience. In addition to the author, the debate featured the following guests (in order of presentation of papers): Jacek Migasiński (University of Warsaw), Monika Murawska

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(Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw), and Jarosław Jakubowski (Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz). The debate was moderated by Magdalena Kozak (Ignatianum University in Cracow). It was broadcast via the Webex platform (by Cisco) and streamed live on the YouTube channel of Ignatianum University.

Following a concise overview of the publication given by the author, the primary paper in the debate, entitled *Hermeneutyka jako koło ratunkowe fenomenologii* (*Hermeneutics as the Lifeline of Phenomenology*), was presented by Migasiński. In the opening remarks, the speaker underscored the foundational aspect of Lorenc's theorizing: namely, the notion of late modernity as a cognitive disposition of culture. The fundamental characteristic of this condition is a loss of ontological security, an uncertainty resulting from the inconclusive positioning of the subject in the world. However, as Migasiński noted, this neither delights nor frightens the author; on the contrary, it opens the field for her to reflect on ways of dealing with such a cultural situation. Migasiński further noted that Lorenc privileges the new phenomenology among possible solutions, for it (taking inspiration from Heidegger) introduces discourse in place of the transcendental subject, also reaching the affective side of human behavior. Its proponents advocate corporeality, the horizon of facticity, and the rehabilitation of appearances, which, as Migasiński demonstrates, opens up new methodological possibilities. The author of the talk stressed that what characterizes Lorenc's point of view is the intersection of phenomenology and hermeneutics. The utilization of hermeneutic methods in phenomenology emerges as a valid postulate when confronted with the intricacies of the late modern context, serving as a crucial lifeline. Finally, the question was posed as to whether these methodologies could reach the pre-lingual as a source of the phenomenalization of the world.

In her response, Lorenc underlined the interconnections between hermeneutics and phenomenology, invoking the perspective of Paul Ricoeur, who characterized Edmund Husserl's philosophy as a hermeneutic undertaking. She identified the hermeneutic elements of Husserl's thought, including the presence of the subject in a pre-existing signifying world and the concept of genetic phenomenology, which she regarded as having a profoundly hermeneutic character insofar as it aims to demonstrate the genesis of meaning. Concomitantly, she acknowledged that the philosophical-hermeneutic project faces some challenges, such as identifying the pre-linguistic conditions of the possibility of experiencing meaning and advancing the study of language functions other than that of signification. In her opinion, art, with its sensitivity to sense/meaning and sensual means, and constituting

a universe that precedes the division between word and thing, can play a considerable role in this process.

This was followed by Murawska's paper, entitled *Niepewność niedokończonego projektu—nowoczesność, romantyzm, fenomenologia* (*Uncertainty of the Unfinished Project—Modernity, Romanticism, Phenomenology*). In it, the author referred to Agata Bielik-Robson's thesis on unfinished Romanticism and wondered whether Lorenc's thought on late modern phenomenal uncertainty could be placed within the perspective of Romanticism. Murawska's position was that post-phenomenology emerges in Lorenc's book, like romanticism in Bielik-Robson's, as a new form of rationality. In both cases, the subject is understood as something more than the Cartesian *cogito*. In both cases, it submits to the influence of reality without rejecting it in an idealistic way. The second common element identified by Murawska is the apotheosis of poetry: Lorenc dedicates significant attention to the language of poetry, demonstrating the transformative potential of literature in facilitating a deeper connection between the subject and the world. The third element consists in the essential features of Romanticism identified by Robson: namely, metaphysics and individuation. According to Murawska, these are present in Lorenc's take on post-phenomenology, where metaphysics is expressed as a need and individuation as the experience of trauma and anxiety.

In the second part of her presentation, Murawska lauded the concept of intertwining phenomenology with late modernity. She suggested that this integration replaces traditional notions of phenomenological certainty with a more dynamic array of uncertainty, fiction, and ephemerality. According to Murawska, this shift liberates phenomenology from its established boundaries, propelling it into new, unexplored territories. In Murawska's view, the uncertainty of the phenomenon, as elaborated by Lorenc, shows the path that phenomenology has taken, becoming, in a sense, the opposite of itself—from the philosophy of certainty to the apotheosis of the uncertain phenomenon.

In response, Lorenc recognized that the analogy with Romanticism provides an interesting trajectory for analyzing late modernity. She concurred that post-phenomenology has the characteristics of Romanticism, understood, following Bielik-Robson, as a form of rationality negotiating between Cartesianism and transgression. The two currents express a sensitivity to the fluidity and elusiveness of phenomenal articulations; both emphasize the messianic role of the aesthetic, and in both can be found motifs of longing for nature, a return to childhood, a withdrawal to the sources of experience. Lorenc invoked Friedrich Schelling's polarity of the

natural and the ideal, pointing to the dialectic between the visible and the invisible that, according to her, post-phenomenology extends to the entire epoch. Furthermore, she emphasized the original romantic nature of engaged reason, which is not outside the world but present in multiple immersion strategies.

The final presentation, delivered by Jakubowski, bore the title *Poświadczenie niewypowiedzianego* (*Attestation of the Unspeakable*). The author referred to the category of ontological security that Lorenc has adopted from Anthony Giddens, and in this context he pondered the optimal utilization of the term “uncertainty.” He regarded this concept as predominantly cognitive, whereas the question of ontological security pertains to the order of praxis. Furthermore, Jakubowski argued that the category of certainty-uncertainty is solitary and has no reference to relationality, so he asked whether, for example, the concept of disorientation would not work better in a given context. A departure from the purely cognitive sphere can also be offered by the Ricoeurian category of attestation which, in Jakubowski’s view, better describes the drama unfolding between experience and the one who experiences.

For Jakubowski, the most salient question remains that of pure phenomenality (to which the new phenomenology gravitates): the transcending of phenomena as filled with content. Citing Jean-François Lyotard’s concept of figurality, he underscored a certain tension between the individual experiencing and the very phenomenality (appearing itself). He further explored the implications of this dichotomy for the status of the attestor, inquiring about the methods by which the attestor can recognize or identify themselves within this complex framework.

In response, Lorenc acknowledged that the difference pointed out by Jakubowski affects how the “I” experiences itself. A state of fragmentation characterizes the subject experiencing this distinction. However, Lorenc emphasized that this rupture should not be evaded through the purging of phenomena of their content elements, as this would risk resulting in an empty universality. Lorenc underscored that this is not the direction of her considerations. Instead, she advocated accepting non-identity, tension, and inseparability between the manifestation and its content. Addressing the issue of ontological security, Lorenc stressed that within phenomenology, it is not conceptualized at the theoretical level but rather within the framework of *praxis*, while maintaining the interconnectedness of these two spheres. In this manner, phenomenology undertakes the task of restoring humanity’s lost unity with the world. The author acknowledged the complexity of this undertaking within the context of postmodern practices.

Concepts such as Merleau-Ponty's perceptual faith, Maldiney's and Marc Richir's openness to the event, or Lyotard's childhood of thought may prove beneficial. In alignment with the Ricoeurian concept of trust suggested by Jakubowski, Lorenc proposed the category of *amor fati* as a formula for consenting to uncertainty.

Finally, Lorenc addressed two inquiries posed by observers of the debate in the chat room. The first pertained to the capacity of phenomenology, as elucidated by the book, to address the issue of the new materialism. The author replied that this subject had been touched upon in her book, particularly in the section where she discusses the experience of landscape. However, she clarified that this is not her specific area of research interest. The second inquiry concerned the difficulties of contemporary phenomenology. Lorenc acknowledged its numerous challenges and said that there is no single fundamental difficulty. The book, like the debate, confirmed the existence of tensions and paradoxes that can help us arrive at the realization that being in modernity requires, on the one hand, immersion and identification and, on the other, a certain distance and skepticism—where between these two attitudes there is a situation of continuous tension.

All book debates organized by the Institute of Philosophy of Ignatianum University in Cracow are available online (in Polish) on the Ignatianum University YouTube channel.