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Introductory Essay: The Mystery of the Background *qua* Background

*Hubert L. Dreyfus*

We can never look upon the phenomenon of world directly.

Martin Heidegger

1. Introduction

Philosophers agree that the background is hidden and holistic. The way that background is hidden and holistic, however, is understood in two radically different ways:

- A phenomenological/cognitivist account holds that the background is an *aggregate* of independent elements. For Edmund Husserl, for example, the background consists in an aggregate of implicit sedimented intentional states (*Geltungen*) which can in principle always be made explicit. As Husserl puts it: ‘[E]ven the background [...] functions according to its implicit validities’ (Husserl, 1970, p. 149).

- An opposing account has been worked out by Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. According to these existential phenomenologists, the background, *qua* background, must *withdraw* to do its job. For them, the background is a *whole* on the basis of which things can show up, but anything that shows up does so only on the condition that the background not show up. That is, the background *qua* background must remain hidden and cannot be made explicit.

2. Homer

Homer already sees the phenomenon of the background and describes it as an illumination that makes possible clear, coordinated action. *The Odyssey* describes a situation where Odysseus and Telémakos are fully in sync with each other responding masterfully to the solicitations in the situation as
they lock up the weapons that the suitors might use to defend themselves. Homer tells us:

And now the two men sprang to work...
while in their path Pallas Athena
held up a golden lamp of purest light.
Telémakos at last burst out:
‘Oh, Father,
here is a marvel! All around I see
the walls and roof beams, pedestals and pillars,
lighted as though by white fire blazing near.
One of the gods of heaven is in this place!’

(Homer, 1990a, p. 354)

That Telémakos sees things lit up does not mean that he sees the illumination but rather that everything is showing up with ultimate clarity and sharpness, the way the ball slows down and looks bigger to the intensely involved master batter at the plate. Since context and entities are only clearly defined when well lit, Telémakos thinks Athena must be holding up a lamp.

But Odysseus understands that only if one lets the light provided as guide to action without focusing on the illumination as a visible light source can the lighting do its job of drawing those involved to act at their best. So we hear Odysseus warning Telémakos not to try to turn the background lighting into a foreground figure. That is, Telémakos must let the ambient light withdraw. Only if it stays in the background can it do its work of guiding the two men.

[So] then said Odysseus, the great tactician,
‘Be silent; curb your thoughts; do not ask questions.
This is the work of the Olympians....’

(Homer, 1990b, p. 380)

Odysseus’ warning is an existential phenomenological account of the background and how it works. In general, if you try to reflect on the source of the intelligibility of the situation, that is, if you try to think about why things are going so well rather than just letting yourself be drawn to respond directly to the solicitations lit up in the current situation – you will at best perform competently. At worse, you will lose your skill altogether.

To capture the phenomenon, consider Chuck Knoblauch, the infamous second baseman for the New York Yankees. Once considered one of the game’s best fielders, Knoblauch developed severe and inexplicable throwing problems in 1999. He became incapable of accurately making the short throw from second to first. Knoblauch worked desperately on his throwing, but the more attention he paid to it the worse the problem got.
This phenomenon is more common than one might think – it occurs in sports like baseball, golf, and tennis – and it is commonly called ‘the yips’. The standard explanation is that the athlete’s thought begins to get in the way of his body’s finely honed ability to respond of its own accord. Instead of letting the activity be drawn out of him by the background attractions and repulsions, Knoblauch was attempting to generate the activity deliberately.

The idea is that when you are in the zone, when your actions are drawn out of you rather than being generated by you, when you are acting at your best, the worst thing you can do is to get in the way of whatever is going on by trying to turn the indeterminate background into a determinate figure. As a field of forces, the background *qua* background must remain hidden. It cannot be described as having determinate features; it can only be directly responded to, and hinted at, as above, in metaphors of illumination.

### 3. Husserl

The Husserlian view agrees that the background is normally not noticed but claims that it is *implicit* in our experience so phenomenologists can reflect on it and make it explicit. Indeed, Husserl holds that to do philosophy, one must step back from everyday involvement and reflect. It then seems that everyday experience is made up exclusively of subjects (*egos*) with mental states directed towards what Husserl calls objectivities. According to him:

> [W]e move in a current of ever new mental states experiences, judgments, valuations, decisions. In each of these acts the ego is directed toward *objects* in its surrounding world, dealing with it in one way or another. (Husserl, 1970, p. 149)

Since they have conditions of satisfaction, Husserl calls these mental states ‘validities’, (*Geltungen*), and, according to him, they make up the ‘unnoticed’, ‘concealed’, ‘implicit’, background. He tells us:

Thus the manifold acquisitions of earlier active life are not dead sediments; even the *background […]* of which we are always concurrently conscious but which is momentarily irrelevant and remains completely unnoticed, still functions according to its implicit validities. (1970, p. 150)

Husserl adds:

[E]very straightforwardly performed validity in natural world-life always presupposes validities extending back, immediately or mediately, into a necessary subsoil of obscure but occasionally available reactivable validities […] (1970, p. 149)
But this ‘subsoil of reactivable validities’ turns out not to be the background that makes intentional states possible; rather it is merely additional implicit intentional states. That is, Husserl’s conception of an aggregate of implicit intentional states or noemata cannot account for ‘an atmosphere of mute, concealed, but cofunctioning validities.’ (1970, p. 149) Although Husserl uses these terms, his Cartesian subject/object ontology does not allow for a background of withdrawn indeterminate subsoil and a holistic atmosphere. To be implicit and to be withdrawn are incompatible phenomena.

Husserl claims that transcendental phenomenologists study the senses [Sinne] implicit in transcendental consciousness that direct the mind towards objects. On Husserl’s view, the world itself counts as such an object and the mind can in principle relate to it by way of implicit mental meanings. He says:

The world – which is presented to us with all that it intuitively or logically is for us – is none other than the noematic correlate of a universal conscious subjectivity. (1968, p. 339)

To reject Husserl’s Cartesianism in the name of the background requires showing that the world is not an object and so cannot be related to by a noema.

4. Heidegger

To existential phenomenologists, transcendental phenomenologists like Husserl studying how intentional content relates subjects to objects are overlooking what is most primordial. The existential phenomenologists like Heidegger claim that they have brought to light a primordial background on the basis of which thinking, perceiving, and acting are possible. Heidegger’s existential phenomenology discloses the holistic, preconceptual, preintentional background into which we are always already absorbed.

Heidegger calls this ultimate background the phenomenon of world. He points out that the world must withdraw like the light in a room to make it possible for things to show themselves. Objects can be imagined, remembered, and perceived on the background of a withdrawn world – a whole that functions only when one is not paying attention to it. On this view, it follows that the background qua background cannot be implicit because it cannot be made explicit and still be identified with what it was when it was doing its job as background. In short, the background is present by way of withdrawing, and it is only when it is present in this way that it can serve as the ground for anything.

Heidegger saw that equipment, our skills for using it to find our way around in the world and, indeed, the world itself must withdraw in order to do the job of being that on the basis of which things are encountered. Heidegger
points out that for the involved coper the world or the background is a non-intentional, withdrawn whole that makes the functioning of all specific intentional elements possible. Like Homer, Heidegger understands that ‘we can never look upon the phenomenon of world directly’ (1955, p. 298).

Heidegger no doubt had Husserl’s noema in mind when he warned that, when it comes to interpreting our relation to the world,

[we] [...] recognize two fundamentals forms of misinterpretation which the conceptions of ordinary understanding tend to adopt, namely (1) to take what is meant as something present at hand; (2) to take what is meant as something isolated. [...] Moreover, he adds that

it is particularly important to be clear about such misinterpretations, because [the concept world] in particular tends to encourage us to [...] grasp the world as an aggregate. (1955, p. 300)

To avoid this atomistic mistake, Heidegger takes seriously the description of the background as an atmosphere. As an atmosphere, the background is precisely not the aggregate of mental states that Husserl from his detached phenomenological point of view mistakenly assumes. Perhaps, following Pierre Bourdieu, it helps to think of the holistic atmosphere as a field of forces.

According to Heidegger, the functioning of a whole as opposed to an aggregate holds not just for perception and action but for thinking as well. He says, for example:

[In] every individual assertion, no matter how trivial or complicated, we always already speak out of beings that are manifest as a whole, and this ‘as a whole’... itself [is] not in turn the result of a pointing out by way of assertion. Rather assertions can only ever be inserted into what is already there and manifest as a whole. (1955, p. 345)

To sum up: Heidegger holds that the background qua background is a holistic atmosphere, an ambient light, or a world that we are always already in, and that must withdraw in order to enable us to deal with beings. To put it ontologically, ‘beings – where ever and however we approach them – already stand in the light of being’. (1955, p. 357)

5. Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein was worried about the status of the background around the same time as Heidegger was. He realized that the background is not an aggregate of mental states, but some more holistic phenomenon, and like
Heidegger he suggested that there is no way to describe the background at work because to function it had to stay in the background. He says:

Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning.4

But he develops his point in a way that sounds too representational to be Heideggerian:

We judge an action according to its background within human life, and this background is not monochrome, but we might picture it as a very complicated filigree pattern which we surely can’t copy.5

And he continues:

How could human behavior be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. Not what one man is doing now, but the whole hurly-burly (Gewimmel), is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reactions.6

Wittgenstein saw that the background was such a mess that we could not describe it. But it seems that he did not see what Heidegger saw, viz., in principle we cannot describe the world when it is functioning as background since, like the illumination in a room, to do its job it has to withdraw.

Wittgenstein does say, like Heidegger, that the background is a ‘mystery’, but, like a traditional philosopher, he seems to think that the background is not really a mystery but simply a very hard problem. The background is just too complicated – too much of a ‘bussel’ – to be described. So Wittgenstein says very little about it. Only Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty see that it is a phenomenological feature of how skills work that the background qua background must withdraw.

6. Merleau-Ponty

The philosopher who best describes the background’s functioning, viz. that it guides our skillful activity but only on the condition that we don’t pay attention to it, is Merleau-Ponty. And the best account of Merleau-Ponty on the background is offered by Sean D. Kelly.

As Kelly notes in his detailed analyses of Husserl’s account of perceptual experience:

[E]ven though Husserl recognizes the need for a distinction between figure and ground, his account of the distinction obliterates it completely.
Our task in developing Merleau-Ponty’s account is to describe the way the environing objects are experienced as background to the focal thing. (2005, p. 89)

For Heidegger and Wittgenstein, the background is our holistic non-conceptual coping skills, customs, and practices that light up the world and enable us to find our way around in it. Merleau-Ponty, in his account of embodied perception and action, describes in addition how our receptive bodies are absorbed into a background field of forces drawing us to get a maximal grip on the world. He says:

[M]y body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world. This sharpness of perception and action points clearly to a perceptual ground, a basis of my life, a general setting in which my body can co-exist with the world. (1962, p. 250; italics in original)

This is a general claim about all our modes of coping. As Merleau-Ponty points out, the background is not only the condition of the possibility of skillful bodily activity but also of thought:

[I]n order to be able to assert a truth, the actual subject must in the first place have a world or be in the world, that is, sustain round about it a system of meanings whose reciprocities, relationships and involvements do not require to be made explicit in order to be exploited. (1962, p. 129)

Indeed, as Homer already knew, these background involvements and reciprocities cannot be made explicit and continue to function. They are a field of forces, not an aggregate of isolable intentional states like Husserl’s sedimented validities. Such a field of forces can only exist when there is no distance between the absorbed coper and the field. Indeed, as in the Knoblauch’s case, their skill loses its force when attended to from a distance rather than being directly responded to.

Even if students of proximics could work out the rules governing a culture’s distance-standing practices, such rules would fail to capture and could only get in the way of the absorbed skill. In standing vis-à-vis people, we know how to stand the appropriate distance from someone older, younger, the same, or the opposite sex, etc. That is, in any given culture, there is one distance in any particular situation at which members of that culture feel comfortable. However, there are no implicit rules (validities) that dictate the correct location but rather our social skills adapt us to changing situations such as the noise in the background, the other person’s having the flu, etc. Indeed, if we became aware of a culture’s distance-standing practices and then tried to figure out the supposed cultural rules in order to conform to
them, we would lose our skill for standing the appropriate distance from others and would not know where to put ourselves.

To further explain the way the background functions Kelly describes in detail how the lighting context is experienced as the background against which the colour of an object appears. He concludes:

Merleau-Ponty’s view of perception depends upon the idea that the background of our perception of objects and their properties, like the background understanding of a thinker, must recede from view and yet functions everywhere without distance to guide what is focally articulate. (2005, p. 76)

Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it:

Lighting and reflection [...] play their part only if they remain in the background as discreet intermediaries, and lead our gaze instead of arresting it. (1962, p. 310)

Kelly explains:

To say that the lighting leads our gaze, or that it becomes our environment, is to insist that it plays some positive role in our experience. This positive role appears to be very different, however, from the kind of determinate visual presence the lighting would have if I were to focus on it as the figure or foreground of my experience. The experience of background lighting conditions, in other words, is in some sense indeterminate. (2005, p. 84)

Kelly calls our attention to a passage in Merleau-Ponty that captures the sort of indeterminate, withdrawn, pervasive forces that guide our skilled behaviour and yet are so hard to describe.

Like the color, the real thing should be that which stands as the background to every particular presentation of it. It is the norm from which I experience the object as presented in my current perspective to be deviating. We must say about the real thing, in other words, what Merleau-Ponty says about the real color; namely that it persists beneath appearances as the background persists beneath the figure, that is, not as a seen or thought-of quality, but through a non-sensory [i.e., indeterminate] presence. (Kelly, 2005, p. 95)

In general, Merleau-Ponty’s account of absorbed coping depends upon the insight that the background of the perception of objects and their properties,
like the background understanding of a thinker, must recede from view in order to function everywhere to guide what is focally articulate.

Indeed, human beings when coping at their best are open to and coupled with a non-propositional, non-intentional, on-going background field of forces that discloses a familiar world without the mediation of mental content. Mental ‘content’, as its name suggests, whether involved or detached, is still always distanced from its object in the sense that it is a directedness from within the mind to the world or from the world to the mind.

Or, to see the same phenomenon from the other side, equipment withdraws when working at its best. So does the world. That’s why we can never look upon the phenomenon of world directly, and why Odysseus tells Telémakos to stop trying to pay attention to the illumination. Merleau-Ponty would explain that ‘[The] lighting is merely one element of a complex structure, the others being the organization of the field as our body contrives it, and the thing illuminated in its constancy.’ (1962, p. 311)

The Gestalt psychologists clearly recognized that our most basic kind of experience is that of a figure against a ground. This understanding of the pervasive role of the background was at the very foundation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (1962, p. 4). Only a phenomenological description of the figure/ground functioning of the background such as we learn from Merleau-Ponty and Kelly gives us an account of what the background qua background is and why it is crucially important.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, human beings when performing at their best are open to and absorbed in a non-propositional, non-intentional, background field of forces that Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty call the phenomenon of world. If one attempts to attend to these world forces they vanish. Thus, Heidegger defines phenomenology as the study of something not merely implicit, but ‘something that [...] lies hidden [...] but at the same time [...] belongs [...] to what shows itself so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground’ (1962, p. 59). Thus the greatest phenomenologists from Homer to Heidegger agree that, ’we can never look upon the phenomenon of world directly’.

And Heidegger adds: ‘[D]arkness is perhaps always in play, in all thinking. Human beings cannot avoid it. Rather, they must learn to recognize the dark as the ineluctable and to keep at a distance those prejudices which destroy the lofty sway of the dark. The dark has nothing to do with pitch blackness as the complete, sheer absence of light. The dark is rather the secret mystery of what is light. The dark keeps what is light in its presence; what is light belongs to it’ (1976, 56).
Notes

1. In this collection, for example, the identification of the background with ‘cognitive elements’ is taken for granted by Shaun Gallagher (Chapter 4).
4. Ibid.

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