Speculative Realism

Series Editor: Graham Harman

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The End of Phenomenology
Metaphysics and the New Realism

Tom Sparrow

EDINBURGH University Press
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Tom Sparrow’s *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism* is as bold a book as its title and subtitle suggest. Granted, it is not rare in today’s continental philosophy to hear critiques of phenomenology in the name of realism. But such complaints too often resound from the grisly chambers of scientism, where everyone is in a terrible hurry to snuff out the “manifest” or “folk” images of consciousness through brash nihilistic claims about the explanatory powers of neuroscience. Premature dances are held on the grave of phenomenology before even the most basic lessons have been learned from it. By contrast, Sparrow has done his homework within the phenomenological guild. He holds a PhD from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, one of America’s most storied doctoral programs in phenomenology. A profound respect for such thinkers as Husserl, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty is visible throughout Sparrow’s work. Though he speaks bluntly of “the end of phenomenology,” his tone is neither arrogant nor dismissive. Instead, he is filled with optimism that traditional phenomenology can and must be transformed into a new lineage of realist metaphysics.

Until recently, Sparrow was a relatively unknown younger scholar. This immediately changed with the publication of his innovative debut book *Levinas Unhinged* (Zero Books, 2013). Levinas scholarship has largely been exhausted by two approaches that might be called “Right” and “Left” Levinasianism. The Right Levinasians take him mostly for an ethical and religious philosopher, impeccably pious in his calls to respect the Other, and guided by a single divine infinity shining forth in the human face and its command that Thou Shalt Not Kill. The Left Levinasians, hostile to objective ethical codes and filled with outright contempt for religion, can hardly conceal their annoyance with this first group. But rather than offer a fresh alternative, they generally
reduce Levinas to a mere appendage to the supposedly mightier thinker Jacques Derrida. Sparrow, following in the footsteps of Alphonso Lingis, is one of the few commentators on Levinas to find fresh paths irreducible to those of the two aforementioned groups. *Levinas Unhinged* is an endlessly fresh and challenging work that has established Sparrow as one of the most promising new voices in continental thought.

Another book by Sparrow, *Plastic Bodies: Rebuilding Sensation After Phenomenology*, is forthcoming from Open Humanities Press in late 2014. In manuscript form this book made an impression on Cathérine Malabou, the leading philosopher of plasticity, who has written a generous preface to accompany it. While the subtitle of Sparrow’s book again proclaims friction with mainstream phenomenology, it draws deeply from the wells of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas in arguing for *sensation* rather than cognition as the basic material of subjectivity. Here as in the first book, Sparrow combines erudition with an unusual power of original formulation. More generally, he consolidates the strong authorial voice that already rang clear in *Levinas Unhinged*.

That brings us to the present book, possibly his most important so far. The opening sentence of the Preface already captures one’s attention: “At some point during the writing of my doctoral thesis I became obsessed with phenomenological method and frustrated by its professed practitioners.” Obsessed with the method, frustrated by its practitioners. This is typical of Sparrow: his urge to recover an inner kernel of promise from phenomenology without retaining the tedious methodological concerns and tacit antirealism that were encrusted onto the movement from its earliest years. As Sparrow candidly recognizes, “it is ultimately necessary to close the door on phenomenology as an approach to realism.” Despite phenomenology’s thick carnal descriptions of blackbirds, fountain pens, bread, cigarettes, and burning churches, it cannot even match Heidegger’s insights into a deeper withdrawal of real entities from consciousness – much less tell us anything about the interaction of nonhuman objects.

This is the point where Sparrow makes common cause with one prominent recent movement: “Speculative realism signals the end of phenomenology.” But for Sparrow this is less a dramatic recent event than a lingering death that began long ago. No mainstream phenomenologist will be pleased by his verdict that “what we … witness in Husserl’s faithful followers is a kind of living death
of phenomenology: so many phenomenologists walking the earth believing themselves to be the living embodiment of their master’s program, yet practicing a philosophy that has either died or never existed at all.” What entitles Sparrow to such a harsh judgment? I do think he is entitled to it, even though my passion for phenomenology equals Sparrow’s own. The early death of phenomenology stemmed from its systematic avoidance of the realism vs. antirealism debate. In Husserl we find a marked tendency to portray this debate as a “pseudo-problem,” as if phenomenology were a “third way” somehow beyond this apparently vulgar and well-worn question. Admittedly, the same tendency can be found in Heidegger, though the withdrawal of being behind presence in this thinker at least opens a path to a frankly realist position. But Husserl claims that phenomenology is even beyond idealism, since we are always already immersed in a world of objects: loving them, hating them, mocking them, taking them seriously. Yet these intentional objects, as they are known, exist only as correlates of a thinker. They have no autonomous status, and Husserl insists on the absurdity of imagining that any object might not be the potential or actual correlate of some act of thought. In this way, Husserl makes a radical claim about reality that Sparrow rightly rejects: all reality is either thought or the correlate of thought. And if that is not full-blown idealism, then nothing is.

My view is that the primary mission of philosophy is neither scholarship, nor flattery of God, nor flattery of the political Left, nor flattery of natural science, nor flattery of one’s academic tribe. Instead, philosophy’s mission is to produce fresh conceptual alternatives that outflank the grinding intellectual trench wars of the present, whatever they might be. In view of the present-day tendencies in continental thought either to pursue a bloodless old-fashioned phenomenology or to denounce phenomenology with shallow and hectoring lessons on the structure of the brain, few innovations can be more important than Sparrow’s attempt to transform phenomenology from within.

Graham Harman
Ankara
November 2013
At some point during the writing of my doctoral thesis I became obsessed with phenomenological method and frustrated by its professed practitioners. As I read through Merleau-Ponty’s corpus I often found him saying things that seemed to me unspeakable for a phenomenologist. His remarks gnawed at me because I am of the view that a philosophical method is supposed to regulate a philosopher’s metaphysical commitments, that is, what a philosopher is authorized to claim about existence. If this is the purpose of method, I reasoned, then Merleau-Ponty’s method should prohibit him from holding some of his avowed views or else he has no method at all, despite identifying himself as a phenomenologist. While struggling to remain focused on my fundamental argument I found myself perpetually tempted down digressive paths by the myriad metaphysical claims made by Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists whose method of investigation, I believe, confines them to a kind of disavowed antirealism which is unsupported, if not contested, by their practice of description. Today I still think this is true.

At that time, however, chasing these intuitions too far would have deferred indefinitely the completion of my degree, which is why one of my committee members implored me to exorcise my critical demons at a later date in a pamphlet-style polemic called, perhaps, Against Phenomenology. The spirit of that polemic haunts the pages of the Introduction and first two chapters of this book, although not merely for the sake of unleashing frustration or hurling glib criticism at phenomenology just for being phenomenology. Its purpose is to clarify the relation between phenomenology and metaphysical realism, and to prepare a contrast with the philosophical movement that has come to be known as

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speculative realism (SR). Speculative realism’s relation to phenomenology – which varies widely from thinker to thinker – is the focus of the remaining chapters.

My suspicion about the reach of phenomenology was intensified by an encounter with a slightly older new approach in continental philosophy: the object-oriented philosophy (OOP) developed by Graham Harman. In April 2005 I was finishing my first year of doctoral studies in philosophy at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. At the invitation of the same committee member who suggested I put off the present project until after the completion of my PhD, Harman was in town to deliver a lecture and run a workshop on his current research in object-oriented philosophy (now often referred to as object-oriented ontology or OOO), which has since become the most prolific species of speculative realism. Harman, who would become one of the original four participants – along with Quentin Meillassoux, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Ray Brassier – at the landmark colloquium on speculative realism held at Goldsmiths, University of London in April 2007, delivered a paper on Leibniz and facilitated a small-group discussion of Heidegger and the “volcanic structure of objects.” Harman’s talks and presentation style intrigued me, so I picked up his books Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects and Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things. Not until I began serious work on my dissertation prospectus did I realize that Harman, and especially his discussion in Guerrilla

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1 It is now common to qualify the use of this term, “speculative realism,” and call into question its very existence or announce its nascent demise. It is increasingly common to denounce it as a mere Internet trend or blog phenomenon. While it may be difficult to identify the red thread running through all of those philosophies that answer to the name of speculative realism, it is not impossible. Moreover, it would be wrong to denigrate these philosophies for their links to blogging, open access publishing, and para-academic practices, all of which are virtues of the movement and increasingly vital to the future of the humanities. Before too long it will be plainly evident that calling these links vices is simply reactionary, a conservative attempt to safeguard the institutional power of the traditional academy and its scholarly appendages. Indeed, the practices of speculative realism mark its timeliness as much as its potential to alter the institution of philosophy.
Metaphysics of the “carnal phenomenologists” (Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Lingis), would be an invaluable ally in my study of phenomenology. More specifically, he would give me an alternative route to the things themselves, one decidedly realist in persuasion. Not only did his work offer an innovative approach to Heidegger, it presented the work of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas in a fresh light that I found lacking in the critical literature on phenomenology. It took Alphonso Lingis seriously as a philosopher. It confirmed many of my suspicions about what phenomenology can and cannot accomplish. Finally, it approached the work of deconstruction and poststructuralism in a way that made me realize their ascendancy in continental philosophy was waning, that their hegemony was not inevitable, and that new paths of research were opening up. Speculative realism was one of those paths.

While phenomenology offers clues to the new directions in realism that have taken hold after the “speculative turn” in continental philosophy, it is ultimately necessary to close the door on phenomenology as an approach to realism. Speculative realism signals the end of phenomenology. The present book is an attempt to explain why Harman and the other speculative realists are not and cannot be phenomenologists, as well as how the methods of speculative realism fulfill the promise of phenomenological realism. If phenomenology harkened us to the things themselves, speculative realism actually delivers them.

My title, The End of Phenomenology, bears a double meaning. It first implies that speculative realism, as noted, brings phenomenology to a close, either as the fulfillment of the hope of phenomenology or as the displacement of phenomenology as the beacon of realism in the continental tradition. Second, it suggests that phenomenology has perhaps already come to an end; or, to borrow some of phenomenology’s own language, that it has always already come to an end. If this is the case, there are many who have failed to recognize it. I will argue that phenomenology really began and ended with Husserl; or, rather, that his famed perpetual return to the beginning of phenomenology was at the same time a perpetual ending of phenomenology. If he could never settle on what phenomenology should become, it is not clear that it ever was anything at all. What we then witness in Husserl’s faithful followers is a kind of living death of phenomenology: so many phenomenologists walking the earth believing themselves to be the living embodiment of their master’s program, yet practicing a
philosophy that has either died or never existed at all. So, in addition to working out the relationship between speculative realism and phenomenology, I hope also to contribute to our understanding of the current state of phenomenology.

This book accomplishes two things. First, it interrogates phenomenology to see if it qualifies as realist in any sense. Second, it examines several of the primary speculative realists to identify the extent to which their work engages and disengages phenomenology. Some figures, Harman for instance, draw quite heavily from phenomenology, while others, like Grant and Jane Bennett, engage phenomenology only peripherally. Uniting these two investigations is the thesis that, for much of the twentieth century, it was phenomenology that promised to satisfy the desire for realism among continental thinkers, but now it is clear that phenomenology cannot deliver realism as commonly understood. Speculative realism returns us to the real without qualification and without twisting the meaning of realism. This return, however, is not unified and does not follow a singular method. It is as diverse as its many practitioners. But I hope to provide here an account of the coherence that underlies its diversity and to indicate the options opened by those working in the field.

There should be little doubt that speculative realism has taken hold in continental philosophy. Not only have numerous books appeared under its aegis, but conferences, workshops and colloquia continue to stage discussions of the topic. A major university press, Edinburgh, has initiated a series devoted to work in speculative realism; several journals have emerged to further critical discussion of it; university fellowships have been offered to research it; and senior members of the continental establishment are engaging it in their published work.² This is all in addition to the international network of blogs and para-academic events that have come to be associated with the new realism.³

Whereas many call themselves phenomenologists, there are few who explicitly identify their work as speculative realism. Harman is the glaring exception to this rule. The other three

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³ This and more is catalogued in Graham Harman, “The Current State of Speculative Realism,” *Speculations* IV (2013): 22.
Goldsmith’s realists have, in one way or another, distanced themselves from the label. More are flocking to it. Labels aside, what we are witnessing is not only a resurgence of realism in the continental tradition, but a “lively realism vs. antirealism debate”\(^4\) that was strategically avoided – dismissed as tired or conservative or passé – prior to the emergence of speculative realism. Think of how much effort phenomenology has put into fending off the language of realism and antirealism! In the following chapters I discuss in some detail all four of the Goldsmith’s realists, as well as several notable figures who have accepted Meillassoux’s critique of “correlationism” – and, by extension, critique of phenomenology – and aligned themselves with Harman’s object-oriented philosophy.

To prepare this ground I first provide an account of phenomenology’s philosophical objective and the method it proposes to reach it. The Introduction and first two chapters are critical and written with defenders of phenomenological realism in mind. They are written especially with consideration for those who believe that phenomenology can disclose something about the divine, God, or radical alterity. The remaining chapters are less critical, more introductory, and written for readers familiar with phenomenology but curious to know how speculative realism purports to move beyond the method of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty.

The Introduction asks a sincere, simple question that still begs for an answer after a century of asking: *What is phenomenology?* Some phenomenologists explain the incorrigibility of this question by pointing out, like a philosophy professor teaching Plato to newcomers, the inherently philosophical nature of the question and the problem of giving a satisfactory definition. I suggest that the question has no answer because the idea of phenomenology lacks a coherent center. In phenomenological parlance: it has no *eidos*. The absent center results from a failure on the part of phenomenology to adequately clarify its method, scope, and metaphysical commitments. Ultimately, I reject the idea that such clarification is unnecessary on the grounds that clarification is critical to determining what phenomenology can do and assessing whether or not its practitioners are doing it well.

Chapters 1 and 2, respectively, make the case that phenomenology holds metaphysical commitments despite itself and that phenomenology can only underwrite a rhetoric of realism, not metaphysical realism. This forces us to distinguish between phenomenology and phenomenologists. Just because a phenomenologist says something, this does not mean that what is said is a phenomenological statement or authorized by phenomenological method. These two terms, phenomenology and phenomenologist, are often run together and lead to the erroneous belief that phenomenology is whatever a phenomenologist says or does. The fact that Merleau-Ponty is someone who describes the day’s weather does not entail that his descriptions are part of the phenomenological canon. The question remains: what would make them phenomenological? For this we need a coherent definition of phenomenology. Moreover, just because Merleau-Ponty provides us with a characteristically rich and evocative description of the day’s weather, then adds that he sincerely believes in the autonomous, mind-independent reality of meteorological events, this does not entail that phenomenology authorizes him to make realist commitments. What I try to show is that, if there is any realism in phenomenology, it is the product of a sophisticated “rhetoric of concreteness.” If a phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty commits to some form of metaphysical realism (“weather events will continue to exist when humanity goes extinct!”), this commitment is speculative and, as speculative, nonphenomenological. The same applies to the claims of transcendence made by members of phenomenology’s “theological turn,” two responses to which – one conservative (held by Dominique Janicaud), one progressive (held by Lee Braver) – I discuss to close Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 spells out what Meillassoux means by correlationism, sketches it weak and strong forms, and examines some of its entailments. It builds the case against realist phenomenology by arguing that phenomenology is in principle strong correlationism and, as such, prohibited from making realist metaphysical commitments. Additionally, it shows how Meillassoux works through strong correlationism to arrive at his own position, which he names “speculative materialism.”

Chapter 4 is devoted to Harman’s object-oriented philosophy, in particular its emergence and departure from phenomenology. Phenomenology is a perfect example of what Harman calls the “philosophy of access.” These are philosophies that privilege the
human/world correlation and as such dull, or “undermine,” the realist edge of claims about what exists. Discontented with the philosophy of access, Harman taps the resources of Husserl, Heidegger, and the carnal phenomenologists to construct a nonphenomenological philosophy of objects. His work paves the way for a new wave of speculative realism, explored in the follow-up chapter.

Chapter 5 provides a synoptic account of the remaining Goldsmiths speculative realists, Brassier and Grant, and several established figures of the second wave of speculative realism, namely, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, Timothy Morton, and Jane Bennett. The chapter does not provide a detailed account of their views, nor criticize their positions. It is meant to signpost future directions in SR and OOO, and to give a rough idea of how these directions rub elbows with, modify, or sever themselves from phenomenology. In the same vein, the Conclusion of the book summarizes what I take to be the many ends of phenomenology and its strongest means of resisting death.

Even though this book is written for a general audience, one faction of which are readers well-versed in phenomenology but unfamiliar with speculative realism, I do not introduce or discuss speculative realism as though the reader is completely ignorant of it. Even today, nearly seven years since its inauguration, many authors (whether in published articles or conference papers) begin by explaining what speculative realism is before launching into the criticism that makes up the substance of their text. What I have done here is weave together my presentations of speculative realism and phenomenology so that readers familiar with one camp will readily discern the import of the other. With any luck this will minimize the fatigue that inevitably results from reading a book whose exposition of old terrain is a necessary stepping stone to new territory.

This book was made possible by several invaluable persons, especially Graham Harman and the editorial and design team of Carol Macdonald, Tim Clark, Jenny Daly, and Rebecca Mackenzie at Edinburgh University Press. Dan Selcer planted the seed for the book and opened my eyes to the necessity of thinking about method in philosophy. If I have applied his lesson poorly, the fault is entirely my own. Likewise, my perspective was crafted by conversations with Fred Evans, Rich Findler, Adam Hutchinson, Laura McMahon, Leon Niemoczynski, Tom Rockmore, and George
Yancy. Two anonymous readers for Edinburgh University Press wisely suggested I reframe the book, and I thank them not only for their suggestion but also for bolstering my courage to write. Without the patience, understanding, and affection of Cierra Clark my daily struggle with writing would have been much less bearable. Many thanks to all of you.
I cannot even for an instant imagine an object in itself.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
“The Primacy of Perception”

And that’s why I love those guys from the Goldsmiths panel last April . . . They are realists without being boring. Why are realists in philosophy always so boring? Not these guys.

Graham Harman,
email to the author et al.,
24 November 2007
Introduction

Once Again, What is Phenomenology?

The Question of Method

While not all variants of speculative realism borrow from the literature of phenomenology, all of them do share the phenomenological aspiration to engage reality on its own terms. It is this aspiration – coupled with a longstanding belief in the naïveté of such an aspiration – that provokes the question of method. Is this actually achievable? How do we get there? Which school – phenomenology or speculative realism – is best equipped to put us in touch with the real? Neither? Both? On the face of it both steer continental philosophy onto the road out of Kantian idealism and into what Quentin Meillassoux has called “the great outdoors” of realism. Throughout the twentieth century phenomenology promised to get us “back to the things themselves,” that is, back in touch with the world of lived experience as it is lived. But what phenomenology actually delivers is a subtler version of the Kantian world for-us, not the world of real or material things as they are in themselves. Phenomenology does not get us to the noumenal, it instead keeps us chained to the phenomenal, where we have been all along. Despite appearances, only speculative realism can actually get us out of Kant’s shadow. This requires a radically different method than the one introduced by Husserl and modified by his descendents. For anyone searching for a realist alternative to the Kantian program, phenomenology appears as a dead-end that leaves its practitioners gesturing toward the outside without ever actually stepping out of the house. This introduction explores the problem with defining the method of phenomenology as well as the rhetoric of “concreteness” that gives phenomenology the feel of realism without actually delivering a realist metaphysics.
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It would be inaccurate to claim that either phenomenology or speculative realism adheres to a standard, univocal method. The various figures gathered under the speculative realist label deploy disparate methodologies, although each in their own way attempts to overcome the antirealist hegemony in continental philosophy. Toward this end they share a willingness to speculate about things metaphysical and, some more than others, to construct original ontologies. This compels them to reach beyond the finite limits of perception, historicity, and language. Another thing shared by the multiple variants of speculative realism is a rejection of the ontological primacy of the correlation between thought and being. Not all of them reject the legitimacy of the correlation as such, but all do agree that there is much more to the real than what appears within human consciousness. There is, however, much disagreement about just how to characterize the real. Phenomenology, by contrast, is exclusively committed to investigating only those dimensions of human experience that take shape within the correlation between thought and being. To be sure, it explicitly focuses philosophy’s lens on what is evidenced within this correlation. Although each phenomenologist assumes this task in their own idiosyncratic way, each one is bound to the method of phenomenology which, however it is construed, eschews metaphysical speculation. Unlike speculative realism, phenomenology purports to practice something called phenomenology, while few, if any, speculative realists pledge their allegiance to a speculative realist methodology.

Despite their resolution to speak only of what is evidenced – that is, intuitively given and identified as this or that – in the correlation between consciousness and world, it is not difficult to find a phenomenologist making metaphysical assertions. Even Husserl and Heidegger make metaphysical claims that are not legitimated by phenomenological evidence. Phenomenologically speaking, they are illegitimate precisely because phenomenology is supposed to be metaphysically neutral on the existence of the things of the world. This is the meaning of the methodological device known as phenomenological “epoché” (suspension, bracketing), which is Husserl’s analogue to the radical methodological doubt implemented by Descartes in the Meditations. The epoché does not force the phenomenologist to actually doubt the existence of the world as it appears to consciousness, but merely
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prevents her from making any judgment about the existence of things. As such it cannot be metaphysically realist. Such assertions, I suggest, are akin to non sequitur in the sense that they do not follow from, and are not supported by, the phenomenological method. Just as the empiricist method deployed by Hume in a text like “Of Miracles” could not justify his commitment to the existence of miracles, phenomenology cannot justify commitments to what is not disclosed phenomenologically. And much of what realism is committed to is never disclosed phenomenologically. This is not to say that a transcendental phenomenologist is not permitted to hold realist commitments. What I mean is that those commitments are not the product of the phenomenological method or phenomenological description. Phenomenology, I contend, must lead necessarily to either antirealism or metaphysical agnosticism. It therefore cannot be realist because its method prohibits the kind of speculation required for grounding realism in philosophical argument. This kind of speculation we get in speculative realism.

Husserl founded the phenomenological movement by perpetually writing, rewriting, and beginning to write books and lectures that would define the precise principles of the phenomenological method and conform it to “rigorous science.” It is now commonplace to point to this constant rewriting and rethinking to epitomize Husserl’s work in essence or to characterize phenomenology’s approach to philosophy. It is often regarded as one of its virtues. Even today the critical edge of phenomenology is lauded as a “perpetual self-rejuvenation, for which [phenomenology] is ready to ransom all the prestige attached to a mature, tried-and-tested doctrine.” Husserl was never satisfied with the presentation, which means that would-be phenomenologists are left without a definitive statement of how properly to conduct a phenomenological investigation. They are likewise without a proper understanding of how far phenomenology can take us toward solving the classical problems of philosophy. This is no doubt a crucial reason for the methodological disparity among phenomenologists. Nevertheless, it must be possible to establish at least what Husserl considered the necessary elements of phenomenological method, however minimal these elements may be. Without these is it possible to know how to practice phenomenology? If the method of phenomenology is uncertain, it is difficult
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to see how its results could be reliable, let alone rigorously scientific. As Husserl writes, only a “positive criticism of principles of method” can give us “confidence in the possibility of a scientific philosophy.” If Husserl saw this clearly, his followers remain less concerned about securing the integrity of their method. Many since Husserl have asked about the meaning of phenomenology. Still no consensus exists. Methodologically speaking, this is phenomenology’s fateful, perhaps fatal, vice.

Husserl’s descendants, often the most prominent, rarely take his efforts to establish the science of phenomenology as seriously as he did. As Dermot Moran has noted, following Paul Ricoeur, “phenomenology is the story of the deviations from Husserl; the history of phenomenology is the history of Husserlian heresies.” His followers interpret and apply phenomenology as they wish, often preferring to reroute it down a less scientific, more existential path. It is generally reconceived as the philosophy that dispenses with abstractions in order to get us back in touch with what it is like to live and think in the real world. Some, including Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, downplay or outright reject the idea of phenomenology as a strict philosophical method. But if it is not a method, then what is it? More than forty years after Husserl published his *Logical Investigations* (1900–1), Merleau-Ponty expressed wonder that this question was still unanswered, so he took the opportunity to once again redefine phenomenology, as Heidegger and others had done before him. In the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* he decides that phenomenology is not really a method, but instead a style of philosophy: “the opinion of the responsible philosopher must be that phenomenology can be practised and identified as a manner or style of thinking, that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy.” If it does not render meaningless the allegiance to phenomenology, an interpretation like this definitely calls into question the integrity of the phenomenologist’s method, even as it insists that “phenomenology is accessible only through a phenomenological method.” It basically casts phenomenology’s net too wide and does little to prevent us from gathering a whole range of philosophers and nonphilosophers under the umbrella of phenomenology, whether they self-identify as phenomenologists or not. It allows someone like Moran to count Hannah Arendt amongst the important figures in the phenomenological
movement, despite the fact that Arendt “exhibited no particular interest in the phenomenological method and contributed nothing to the theory of phenomenology.”

For Moran it is enough that Arendt’s work “can be fruitfully understood as a species of phenomenology.” This is only possible, however, because Moran vaguely and typically defines phenomenology as an “anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer.” Vagueness of this sort does not help us to understand what makes phenomenology unique and, in fact, seems to implicate more than one school of philosophy as well as some other fields of inquiry, like ethnography. Moran’s definition (along with many others) has a post hoc ring to it, and seems motivated in part by a desire to have the definition apply to anyone who has been called a phenomenologist as well as many who have not. On this definition we could call Melville a phenomenologist of whaling, Thoreau a phenomenologist of walking, or Foucault a phenomenologist of power. A post hoc definition cannot satisfy the demands of method, which needs to be worked out prior to the study it is meant to guide.

Nearly all of the major phenomenologists see phenomenology as a method, which means they see it as directed by a certain set of principles or attitudes that circumscribe its practice. This view is shared by Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Levinas, Ricoeur, Marion, and many others. Even in their disagreement about what precisely is entailed in it, they recognize that liberties cannot be taken when trying to pin down a philosophical method without compromising the very integrity of that method. A method is supposed to rein in spurious conjecture and speculative impulse, not send out search parties in every possible direction. Absent a clear method we are not unlike, as Descartes says, “someone who is consumed with such a senseless desire to discover treasure that he continually roams the streets to see if he can find any that a passer-by might have dropped.” A trustworthy method is necessary if we wish to be more than fortunate in our philosophical investigations.

What exactly is a method? Descartes gives the following definition in Rule Four of the Rules for the Direction of the Mind.
This is not the only possible definition, but it comes from the philosopher who provides Husserl with his model of methodological reflection and is presumably sufficient for the moment:

By “a method” I mean reliable rules which are easy to apply, and such that if one follows them exactly, one will never take what is false to be true or fruitlessly expend one’s mental efforts, but will gradually and constantly increase one’s knowledge till one arrives at a true understanding of everything within one’s capacity.  

In one sense a method is about conserving energy, ensuring efficiency, guaranteeing accuracy, and growing knowledge. In another sense method is about restricting what can and cannot be said, what counts as a legitimate statement and what does not. When John Watson, for example, lays down the methodological guidelines of behaviorism he explicitly puts the domain of introspection out of play from the behaviorist standpoint. This is why we would, and should, be suspicious if Watson were to begin talking about mental life the way that, say, William James does. It is precisely the prohibition against this kind of talk that not only defines Watson’s method, but also provokes someone like James or Merleau-Ponty to devise a new approach to account for the complexity of human behavior, one that allows him to say more about mental life than the behaviorist allows. This is one way to think about method: as a device that enables its adherents to make statements that are not authorized for nonadherents. And to be clear, it is neither authority nor power that authorizes these statements. It is the method itself. A method opens up a new domain of speech and is precisely what guarantees the legitimacy of that speech. Husserl was no foreigner to Cartesian method, which clearly instructs us to order our thoughts and stick to our principles when attempting to extract the truth of experience. For the phenomenologist, not unlike Descartes himself, legitimacy is garnered by the fulfillment of an intention in experience underwritten by the certainty or givenness of subjectivity.

Husserl’s phenomenology develops in response to a perceived crisis in the sciences and philosophy. The crisis is the result of a certain “corruption” of existence, of the “spirit” of humanity in early twentieth-century Europe. The corrupting force, according to Husserl, is what he calls the “exteriorization” of reason in the naturalistic objectivism that dominates the science of his day.
Naturalism attempts to subject every domain of existence to the rigor of mathematical science, and ideally limit the sayable to the language of mathematics. At the heart of this crisis is the Cartesian conviction that everything, including human consciousness, can be quantified and thereby understood – the dream of a *mathesis universalis*. Phenomenological method, for Husserl, is supposed to resolve this crisis by humbling the tendencies of naturalism and calling radically into question the presuppositions of objectivist sciences and philosophy. Phenomenology is the antidote, then, to the kind of naturalism that “alienates” the immortal human spirit by reducing it to third-person natural knowledge. But this antidote cannot be administered without first neutralizing the philosophical foundation of dualistic naturalism, namely the view that both nature and spirit are realities (*Realitäten*) in the same sense. For Husserl, only spirit is truly real in the sense of autonomous, in itself, and for itself. Nature, by contrast, is the product of the spirit that studies it. Only once the neutralization of naïve naturalism is accomplished can the essence of spirit be reclaimed from the clutches of barbaric naturalism. Transcendental phenomenology is the only method equipped for the scientific study of spirit and the legitimation of statements about nature, spirit (the ego, consciousness), and their internal relation.

In an exposition of the meaning of the phrase “to the matters [things] themselves,” found in the 1925 lecture course *History of the Concept of Time*, Heidegger attempts to pinpoint the meaning of method. He is obviously attempting to characterize phenomenology. As someone grappling with the prospect of phenomenology as a method, he helps us get a handle on what Husserl was up to in his attempt to burrow beneath the method of naturalism which, in his view, brought about the crisis to which phenomenology is the only philosophical response. For Heidegger, method is one of the basic components of what he calls a principle of research. It is the “principle of developing the way of dealing with [a subject matter]...” It is clear that for Heidegger the “way of dealing” with “the matters themselves,” which is the most general object of phenomenological research, is not via a constructive or speculative route. This way is “groundless.” A grounded approach is one that is “autochthonously demonstrative” and which “lay[s] the foundation” for this demonstration. For phenomenology the demonstrable is what is evidenced in the
phenomena" themselves, not what is deduced from the idea of the things themselves or from the idea of phenomenology. Phenomenology is not a deductive method, but, as it were, an adductive method in the sense that it is committed to adducing the matters themselves through concrete experience. The matters themselves are the source of the method, as it were. This principle of research is not plucked out of thin air, Heidegger insists, but is something gleaned “from its concretion in the research work” itself.22 For Husserl as well as Heidegger (this is examined in more detail in Chapter 2), by focusing on the “concrete” things themselves we are led back into the ground of experience, we lay open the foundation of experience, and are ultimately referred to the dimension of intentionality. Intentionality forms the subject matter of phenomenological research or, in Heidegger’s words, “Phenomenology is the analytic description of intentionality in its apriori.”23 Phenomenology is a transcendental investigation into the ground of the matters themselves as they give themselves. It is thus a “methodological” term, inasmuch as it is only used to designate the mode of experience, apprehension, and determination of that which is thematized in philosophy.”24

Heidegger eventually drops, or turns away from, all intensive study of this conception of method. There is more than a little irony in the fact that Husserl worked tirelessly to crystallize a method that would avoid needless philosophical toil, only to come up short and have his project pushed ahead in spirit, but nowhere near the letter. Few today see phenomenology as a scientific endeavor and only some as a propaedeutic to science. It is no longer apparent how phenomenology is to be carried out, or how it differs from, say, thick empirical description or poetic embellishment. This is not to say that phenomenology can be reduced to mere rhetoric, or to claim that phenomenology has never achieved a coherent approach to philosophical problems, but to suggest that perhaps its meaning has proliferated beyond coherence, rendering phenomenology such a diluted term that any activity could qualify as “phenomenological” in nature.

Many practices and inquiries are called phenomenological, but, like “game” (to take Wittgenstein’s example), a refined definition that covers them all seems to be lacking. This may not seem like a problem. It may sound like a naïve Socratic worry. In response, it is tempting to insist that phenomenology is better regarded as a family resemblance term. This would permit the practice of
phenomenology to be as diverse as the worlds it aims to unveil. It would permit the inclusion of Wittgenstein, Ryle, Austin, Cavell, McDowell, and Putnam in the canon of phenomenology, for, after all, each of them bear a “methodological affinity” with Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Simon Glendinning argues for this in *In the Name of Phenomenology*, as does François-David Sebbah and the authors of *The New Phenomenology*. Phenomenology, Glendinning says, is more about the method (the “how”) than it is about the content (the “what”). It is not a set of doctrines, it is about paying closer attention to the appearances that present themselves to subjective experience. How is this done? He does not really say. He prefers to keep the definition “skeletal” to avoid drawing too much attention to particular texts. Nevertheless, he enumerates three possible answers to the question of phenomenology’s content, including: 1) phenomenology is the legitimate heir to what used to be called philosophy; 2) phenomenology is the philosophical answer to modern scientific naturalism; 3) phenomenology is a “work of convincing words” that allows us to retrieve a radical understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

Instead of a singular definition of phenomenology, now we have three different definitions, none of which spell out the methodological principles of phenomenology. Socrates would not be pleased. The latter two formulations characterize phenomenology as basically an ideological reply to the worldview of technoscientific rationality and culture. These capture the historical spirit of Husserl’s motivation for founding phenomenology, but they do not clarify the nature of phenomenology as a philosophical practice. As for the first definition, it is fair enough to call phenomenology the future of philosophy after modernity – this is what Husserl explicitly does in *Cartesian Meditations* – but, once again, it does not specify what it takes to do phenomenology. Glendinning’s distillation of phenomenology is symptomatic, as well as emblematic, of the way phenomenology has been dissociated from its method. Today, anything is called phenomenology so long as it involves some kind of subjective description of experience.

Note also that Glendinning’s formulations do not represent phenomenology as fundamentally concerned with intuiting essences (eidetic intuition) or elaborating the essential structures of consciousness or intentionality. These days there is deep
disagreement about how important this kind of “essentialism” is to the phenomenological project. It is often ridiculed as merely a symptom of Husserl’s latent modernism or idealism. But it is still used to identify the work of phenomenology in individual thinkers. Whenever a philosopher pays especially close attention to a particular region of experience, and attempts to lay out the essential features of that region, this practice is often identified as phenomenology. The working assumption here is that this is what phenomenology does/is. When Moran calls Arendt a phenomenologist of public space or publicness, he no doubt means that her work is remarkably attuned to public life and more than capable of extracting the essential features of it. Nevertheless, as Dan Zahavi points out, “this interest in essential structures is so widespread and common in the history of philosophy that it is nonsensical to take it as a defining feature of phenomenology.”

If phenomenology is about intuiting essences (Wesenschau) as opposed to establishing facts, or empirical evidence, then it still remains to be asked how these essences are to be seen. It is arguable that Husserl was the only person who believed in and sought them with anything like methodological rigor. If there is no singular methodological thread linking the practice of phenomenology, then what does link it? If Merleau-Ponty is right to call phenomenology a style of thinking, then it must be that style which allows the practitioner to, as Raymond Aron put it to Sartre, “talk about this cocktail and make a philosophy out of it.” Now, anyone could talk about a cocktail. William James, to be sure, could talk philosophically about a cocktail. But he is not considered a phenomenologist, although the case has been made for his inclusion in the movement, and no doubt it is his literary style that affiliates him with phenomenology. His inclusion, however, really disrupts the narrative because so much of his work predates Husserl’s inaugural Logical Investigations. And pointing to his style does not get us any closer to understanding what phenomenology as a philosophical practice requires. It simply leads us to ask what it is about a description of the world that makes it phenomenological, if it is not the description’s concern for the essential structure of intentional experience. For every philosophical description we must provide some criteria that would enable us to differentiate the phenomenological from the nonphenomenological, and at this point it is not clear that this can be done. As Heidegger writes: “Phenomenological signifies
everything that belongs to such a way of exhibiting phenomena and phenomenal structures, everything that becomes thematic in this kind of research. The unphenomenological would be everything that does not satisfy this kind of research, its conceptuality and its methods of demonstration." It is not even clear that such a circumscription is desirable or even useful. At any rate, the burden of proof lies on the shoulders of anyone who holds that phenomenology actually exists as a coherent approach.

Philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition can be heard calling phenomenology an enterprise “as moribund as logical positivism,” while countless figures writing in the wake of deconstruction treat it with the kind of contempt Heideggerians reserve for Platonic ontotheology and Cartesian substance ontology. This attitude fails to appreciate the continuing vitality of phenomenology: many phenomenology journals remain active; numerous international conferences are held each year; scholarly societies continue to convene annually. The theological turn taken by figures like Marion, Henry, Levinas, and so forth – all of whom were sharply chastised by Dominique Janicaud in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”* – remains a fertile site of phenomenological research. Ideologically it is quite invested in phenomenology’s recovery (in the wake of what Glendinning calls “the modernist predicament”) of lived experience in every one of its dimensions, particularly the religious. Phenomenology continues as a viable research strategy for social scientists disaffected by more positivistic, quantitative models. Perhaps the most promising program is charted by people like Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Dan Zahavi, Shaun Gallagher, and others: this is the attempt to naturalize phenomenology or otherwise synthesize it with the hard sciences, a project which seems more than a little paradoxical insofar as phenomenology is originally constituted by a suspension of the natural sciences and the naïve metaphysical attitude they presuppose. At this point it remains unclear whether the naturalization of phenomenology would signal the abolition of the ideology motivating the theological turn or instead solidify with hard facts the justification of that ideology. In any event we will not determine here if this marriage is methodologically misguided or not. It should be noted instead that the proliferation of such attempts testifies – against those who would proclaim phenomenology a moribund program – to the health of phenomenological research. This is not to say that many people working in
phenomenology do not take its promise for granted or sugarcoat its apparent incoherence.

If phenomenology has indeed not been abandoned, then what does it mean to speak of the end of phenomenology? I mean to suggest a few things. First, phenomenology has become so diffuse that its methodology seems no longer relevant to its practice. Ever since Heidegger the project of realizing phenomenology as a rigorous science complete with a worked out method of investigation has been abandoned. This is already evident in *Being and Time*. In this respect phenomenology began and ended with Husserl.

Second, insofar as phenomenology lives on today, we must ask what it seeks to accomplish. Does it have a clear *telos*? What end does it have in view? Third, if phenomenologists are still eager to get philosophers “back to the things themselves,” I suggest that this task has a new, better-equipped vanguard. Speculative realism, which mines and adapts the resources of phenomenology, has taken up phenomenology’s call to get us back to reality, but without distracting us from the demand for metaphysical accountability. Speculative realism’s intensive engagements with metaphysics reveal the weakness of phenomenology for the project of realism. Phenomenology forsakes metaphysical realism in favor of a timid “realism” of phenomena that is nothing more than a modified version of idealism, Kantianism by another name. It is commonplace, as I will show in the following chapter, for phenomenologists to pay homage to realism, but not without qualifying their allegiance with scare quotes. What they call the “real” or “realism” is what is given in “concrete” lived experience. To speak of concrete experience, then, amounts to speaking about the real as it appears to a human observer, not as the real is in itself.

What I hope to accomplish in this book is a circumscription of the promise of contemporary phenomenological research while at the same time showing that speculative realism is better equipped to achieve some of phenomenology’s philosophical ends. I will suggest that phenomenology should give up on realism and package itself instead as a formidable idealism. My purpose is quite specific: to demonstrate that, while phenomenologists are often keen to present themselves as thinkers committed to the reality, if not materiality (Henry), of the world they describe, phenomenology is a poor conduit for delivering metaphysical realism. On the contrary, phenomenology is a brilliant vehicle for antirealism in the Kantian vein, and if phenomenology is going to thrive in the
contemporary philosophical milieu, it might do well to enthusiastically embrace its antirealist potential rather than disavowing it. This is a prospect that will inevitably appear unattractive to the adherents of the theological turn, but it is, I think, the best live option. So, when this book proclaims the end of phenomenology, it means that phenomenology as a method for realists has worn itself out. Phenomenology, if it means anything, is simply not a method that can commit itself to the human-independent reality of bodies, objects, qualities, properties, material, or events.

This position will no doubt sound counterintuitive to anyone who has found in phenomenology an ally of the philosophy of embodiment. Even as early as Husserl, but especially after Merleau-Ponty, the body is situated at the center of the phenomenological standpoint. Given the embodied character of our experience, our embeddedness in the lifeworld assumes priority over dispassionate theoretical analysis and the quest for an objective perspective or view from nowhere. If practice always comes before theory, the story goes, then the ideal objects of theory cannot be detached from the living, breathing Umwelt that supports the practice of thinking. This priority is again and again underscored by the phenomenologist, often as a way to remind the reader that this is real, tangible life we are talking about, not some docile mental construction or aloof realm of innocuous abstract entities. The phenomenologist is no armchair spectator! From all of this we are meant to infer – are explicitly told on occasion – that there is a world out there that precedes our existence and, especially, our thought. It is much more than a construction; it exceeds the finitude of human life and thought. Into this reality we are thrown; it receives us because it is always already there, awaiting our birth and outliving our death. Phenomenology, then, is replete with a rhetoric of concreteness that testifies to its realism. This rhetoric should not blind us to the fact that phenomenology remains a poor choice for metaphysical realists precisely because its method prohibits the phenomenologist from actually committing to a reality outside human thought.

It is certainly difficult to deny that phenomenology represents a fresh start in philosophy. It is arguably as radical as the critical philosophy initiated by Kant, even though Husserl and his adherents borrow quite a bit from Kantian transcendental philosophy, including its suspension of metaphysical speculation. Much of its radicality, however, is embedded in the realist rhetoric that
forms a fundamental part of the poetics phenomenology deploys to supplement its methodological constraints. Next I lay out these constraints so that my understanding of what phenomenology is, or must be, is transparent. These constraints I take to be both minimal and essential to phenomenological practice. Phenomenology’s rhetoric of realism forms the focus of the next chapter.

**Minimal Conditions for the End of Metaphysics**

This book does not intend to police the doors of phenomenology for the sake of safeguarding the purity of the school. Nor will it lament the recession of rigor in phenomenological texts. I am not trying exhaustively to specify the sufficient conditions of phenomenological practice, nor am I trying to enumerate the criteria that qualify something as evidence in the phenomenological sense. What I maintain is that for a philosophical description, study, or conclusion to count as phenomenological— that is, to mark it as something other than everyday description, empirical study, or speculative metaphysics—that description must take place from within some form of methodological reduction that shifts the focus of description to the transcendental, or at least quasi-transcendental, level. This is what differentiates the mundane from the philosophical as far as description goes. Since Husserl several types of reduction are commonly identified, most notably the *epoché*, phenomenological, transcendental, and eidetic reductions.

Whether or not these reductions are genuinely multiple or just variations on a singular reduction, entailed in each of them is a suspension or bracketing of what Husserl calls the “natural attitude,” a view which includes either an uncritical or critical belief in the reality of the external world. As Heidegger interprets it, in explicit contrast to its “substantive intent,” the reduction is what leads us from objectively present beings (the ontic) to being itself (the transcendental). He therefore puts the reduction to ontological use, rather than using it as an epistemological or skeptical tool after the manner of Descartes. Merleau-Ponty famously proclaims in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception* that the basic lesson of the reduction is that a complete reduction is impossible because of the incorrigibility of the real world. Like Cartesian doubt, this suspension does not lead us into positive disbelief in the world’s existence. It instead requires us to withhold any
belief, which is to say, neutralize our commitment to either the reality or unreality of the perceived world. As such, the reduction is a prohibition against metaphysics. This, I think, is the absolute minimum condition of phenomenology. Without a suspension of the natural attitude and its attendant realism; without a strict commitment to phenomena as they appear to consciousness as the sole arbiter of truth; and without refraining from committing to anything that does not give itself phenomenally to consciousness, phenomenology cannot maintain its methodological integrity. Either phenomenology is a method whose basic principle includes a suspension of metaphysical commitments – precisely because the metaphysical status of phenomena is not revealed by the phenomena themselves, but is at best hinted at by their resistance or apparent transcendence of human consciousness – or it is simply a name applied to a style of doing philosophy that has no coherent method for establishing the legitimacy of its results.

For phenomenology to be phenomenology it must enact at the very least a suspension of the natural attitude and its concomitant metaphysics. This suspension requires the phenomenologist to confine his or her investigations to the much-derided subject/object correlation. As Dan Zahavi puts it, “The reduction [in contrast to the epoché] is the term for our thematization of the correlation between subjectivity and world.” It is this confinement that lends phenomenology its transcendental flavor. More than mere description, phenomenology means to describe the transcendental dimension of experience as it unfolds within experience itself. It is therefore more basic than the empirical. Without at least some attention to the transcendental, whether this is interpreted as the uncovering of consciousness’s essential structures (Husserl) or the return to prereflective experience (Merleau-Ponty), it becomes nearly impossible to see the philosophical value or understand the institutional influence of phenomenological description. Otherwise put, phenomenology must at least adhere to Husserl’s “principle of principles” (Ideas §24), which dictates that direct intuition is the origin of knowledge and to be respected as its own authority, and necessarily entails the view (hereafter referred to as “correlationism”) that subject and object, consciousness and phenomena, thought and being are inseparable binary pairs. The rejection of correlationism, as we will see, is a foundational brick in the edifice of speculative realism. If phenomenology must commit itself to correlationism, and it seems it must, then speculative
realism’s commitment to the reality of things can be read as anti-phenomenological.

The importance of the phenomenological reduction for twentieth-century continental philosophy cannot be overstated. It is a driving force behind the numerous attempts to overcome metaphysics and crucial to conceiving the end of metaphysics announced by Heidegger, Derrida, and everyone else sympathetic to deconstruction. It is therefore partly responsible for the “linguistic turn” taken by continental philosophers in the wake of phenomenology and deconstruction. And insofar as the resurgent speculative impulse witnessed in contemporary continental theory represents a direct confrontation with the linguistic turn’s desire to overcome metaphysics, it is important to see that the phenomenological reduction is the first step toward the end of metaphysics.\(^4^3\) As John Sallis has shown, Husserl’s *epoché* is nothing other than the installment of the phenomenologist within the correlation of consciousness and being, otherwise known by phenomenology as intentionality or immanence.\(^4^4\) The *epoché* enacts a reduction of transcendent being to immanent presence, and converts real objects into “irreal” or “intentional” objects by neutralizing their existence. As Sallis puts it,

> the εποχή [*epoché*] takes the form of neutrality-modification, neutralizing whatever real existence the object might otherwise be taken to possess, especially that unanalyzed objective existence that things in the world are naturally taken to have. By undergoing the reduction brought by the εποχή, objects come to be taken as being precisely insofar as they *present* themselves in an intentional experience – that is, as being precisely insofar as they are *intentionally present*.\(^4^5\)

From the phenomenological standpoint objects cease to exist in the usual sense of the term. They take on a new, mitigated form of reality as intentional objects, “real” insofar as they are intended or thematized. They assume an “internal reality” within the subject/object correlation, which means that if we wish to call Husserlian phenomenology – or any phenomenology that performs the *epoché* or phenomenological reduction – a realism, as Zahavi writes, “it has to be emphasized that it is a realism based on experience. It is an experiential realism or an internal realism not unlike the one espoused by Hilary Putnam, having no affinities with a metaphysical realism.”\(^4^6\)
If phenomenology is nothing without the reduction – and here I am in agreement with Leonard Lawlor and Eugen Fink, who make “the reduction absolutely necessary for phenomenological research” – then it is necessarily complicit with the end of metaphysics. (Ironically, as we will see in Chapter 3, it is also complicit in legitimating dogmatism, irrationalism, and fideism.) It is the reduction that initiates the return to the things themselves and which, as Sallis notes, “decisively exceeds the history of metaphysics, exceeds it in precisely such a way as to realize its intent and be thus its end.”

If metaphysics is an attempt to either identify or align thought and being, or to render present to thought that which is as it is, then phenomenology accomplishes this end. But it does so at the cost of reducing the reality of being, by rendering being dependent on human consciousness. It empties being of real transcendence. It is true that phenomenology is replete with accounts of the excesses of being (I am thinking here of Marion’s “saturated phenomenon” and Levinas’s wholly Other, as well as Merleau-Ponty’s claim about the impossibility of bracketing the world), but we must ask if these excesses are genuine evidence of a reality beyond consciousness or merely an excess of consciousness, an internal or intentional excess. Here I side with Alexander Schnell when he argues that the excesses of phenomenology (which Husserl calls the “potentialities” of the ego’s “I can” and “I do”) are always internal to intentionality, not evidence of the autonomous reality of what appears in the phenomena. I do not, however, endorse Schnell’s claim that a closer look at “phenomenological metaphysics” can illuminate the speculative nature of phenomenology, mostly because I take “phenomenological metaphysics” to be an oxymoron. Sallis claims that phenomenology itself is capable at times of clarifying that which exceeds the subject/object correlation. He also claims that phenomenology adheres to certain “positings that exceed phenomenology” which cannot be accounted for from within the phenomenological standpoint. In the next chapter I will argue that, while many phenomenologists affirm a reality that exceeds the subject/object correlation and claim to find evidence for this reality within the phenomenological standpoint, it is necessary to qualify their affirmations as nonphenomenological or speculative to flag their metaphysical nature.

It seems that phenomenology is forced into a choice: either it can prepare the groundwork for the end of metaphysics or it can make itself compatible with metaphysical realism. It cannot be
both things at once. If it chooses to bring metaphysics to an end, then it forecloses the possibility of a realist phenomenology. If it allows a return of metaphysics in order to accommodate certain theological or other aspirations, then it can no longer be the harbinger of metaphysics’ demise. How it conceives itself methodologically will inevitably betray its preference for one side of this dilemma or the other.

The Return of Metaphysics and the Speculative Difference

Today it is still believed that phenomenology can get us back in touch with the real. Since, we are told, realism is just as outdated as idealism, and both of them are “in principle absurd” (Husserl),\(^5\) the closest thing to realism that we have on offer is phenomenology. That is, phenomenology, when properly disengaged from Husserl’s brand of Kantianism and converted to existential phenomenology, is the closest we can get to an encounter with the real. This is a myth. The belief that phenomenology gets us realism instead of a modified form of idealism, or correlationism, results from a misunderstanding of the internal relation between the method and metaphysics of phenomenology. No matter how it is interpreted phenomenology can only align itself with antirealism.

So what do the various materialisms and realisms associated with the “speculative turn” in continental philosophy have that phenomenology does not? In a word: speculation – that activity denounced by Kantian critical philosophy and explicitly prohibited by phenomenology. It is commonplace nowadays to point to the rejection or radicalization of correlationism as the move that marks a philosophical position as speculative in the new sense. This is commonplace for good reason: the antirealism entailed in correlationism, which has oriented continental philosophy at least since Kant\(^12\) and quite self-consciously in the twentieth century, is precisely what is spurned by those working in the new metaphysics. We can, however, characterize the new metaphysics – speculative realism included – in a different way, in terms of its commitments. If phenomenology is committed to metaphysical neutrality and to a species of correlationism that legitimates only those statements that are evidenced from within the subject/object correlate (that is, within the reduction), then the new metaphysics
begins with a commitment to the existence of a nonhuman reality outside the subject/object correlate. It then dedicates itself to thinking, describing, demonstrating, and unleashing that reality. Speculative philosophy, moreover, does not restrict itself methodologically to a particular region of research as phenomenology does. Whatever one may think of the arguments for realism, it cannot be said that they put themselves a priori in the bind that phenomenology does. This does not mean that anything goes, but that the range of metaphysical commitments up for grabs is much wider than it is for correlationist philosophies. It is less about limitation, more about proliferation.

As the editors of The Speculative Turn note, the proliferation of speculative philosophy in recent years may be unnerving to some. Is this the return of dogmatic, ungrounded, free-floating knowledge claims? Has the Kantian lesson withered away, leaving us just where we were before the 1780s? Are we asking for another “crisis in philosophy” like the one Husserl felt compelled to remedy? In a sense, the speculative turn is the response to a crisis in philosophy: namely, the antirealist reduction of reality to human reality and the anthropocentrism that, for instance, fuels the current climate crisis. Anthropocentrism and humanism are two of the chief enemies of the new metaphysics. In a less alarmist tone, the speculative turn is not a rejection of the critical philosophy, but “a recognition of [its] inherent limitations. Speculation in this sense aims ‘beyond’ the critical and linguistic turns. As such, it recuperates the pre-critical sense of ‘speculation’ as a concern with the Absolute, while also taking into account the undeniable progress that is due to the labour of critique.” And in an unexpected twist, it is also a critical response to the kind of dogmatism we find in phenomenology’s theological turn.

Does this mean that speculative realism has its own critical method? The short answer is no. What then legitimates its speculative claims? What the various adherents of speculative realism share is a set of commitments, the most significant of which I have already mentioned. These commitments, and their results, form the subject matter of Chapters 3 to 5. In addition to its commitment to speculation and the autonomous reality of the nonhuman world, the new metaphysics affirms several other things, to different degrees, depending on the thinker under consideration. These include, but are not limited to: some kind of disavowal of correlationism; an expansion of the concept of agency; a critique
of humanism and anthropocentrism; a renewed faith in the power of reason to exceed the bounds of perception; a blending of fiction and fact; the generation of metaphysical systems; a taste for the weird, the strange, the uncanny; an object-oriented perspective.

Someone might be tempted to point out a contradiction in my account of speculative realism. “But wait!,” they will say. “You’re effectively saying that ‘speculative realism’ is a family resemblance term, but you’ve just finished arguing that ‘phenomenology’ cannot be seen as a family resemblance term because that doesn’t help us identify any particular philosophy as phenomenology.” To this I would respond: the difference is that no speculative realist claims that speculative realism is a school of thought, a method, a unified movement, or a radical way of practicing philosophy. It is, on the contrary, a loose confederation of thinkers each of whom is committed to a kind of speculation that refuses to draw the limits of the real within the immanence of human consciousness. Its purpose, as I understand it, is to clear the ground for new advances in the thinking of reality. This is, after all, the end of philosophy. If you ask how to spot a speculative realist in the wild, the best way to do so is to ask them about correlationism. If that term means something to them and they indicate a desire to witness correlationism’s demise, then there is a good chance you have found a speculative realist.

Notes

1. Paul Ennis notes on the first page of Continental Realism (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011) that “there is no such thing as continental [speculative] realism as a method.” Louis Morelle asserts that the “only agreed upon reference point” for speculative realism is what Meillassoux calls “correlationism.” While in part true, a critique of correlationism is not the only shared attribute among speculative realists. I try to identify a few more. See Morelle, “Speculative Realism: After Finitude, and Beyond?” Speculations III (2012), 242.

2. Dan Zahavi, Husserl’s Phenomenology (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 46. In Cartesian Meditations Husserl says that the “first methodological principle” of phenomenology is to accept only those judgments derived from evidence, where “evidence” is understood as an “experiencing” or “mental seeing” of what one


22. The End of Phenomenology


27. Glendinning, *In the Name of Phenomenology*, 6, 14, 27.

28. This theme spans nearly all of Husserl’s work, especially after the “transcendental turn” taken post-*Logical Investigations* (1900–1) and is evinced in works like *The Idea of Phenomenology* (lectures delivered in 1907), *Ideas* (1913), and *Cartesian Meditations* (lectures delivered in 1929). Late works like *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936) continue the search for essences, notably the essence of the “lifeworld” (*Lebenswelt*).

29. Zahavi, *Husserl’s Phenomenology*, 37. Thanks to Paul Ennis, who helped clarify this point for me.

30. Husserl, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” 116: “Phenomenology can recognize with objective validity only essences and essential relations, and thereby it can accomplish and decisively accomplish whatever is necessary for a correct understanding of all empirical cognition and of all cognition whatsoever…”


32. Two books called *William James and Phenomenology* exist, one by Bruce Wilshire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968) and the other by James M. Edie (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

34. Brian Leiter, “On Pluralism in Philosophy Departments, Once

35. Dominique Janicaud et al., Phenomenology and the “Theological

36. In Kant and Phenomenology (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 2011), Tom Rockmore makes a compelling case for phe-
nomenology as a viable constructivist (antirealist) approach to epistemology. This, I think, is the most promising future for phenomenology.

37. As Husserl says in Cartesian Meditations, 32: “It must be con-
tinually borne in mind that all transcendental-phenomenological
research is inseparable from undeviating observance of the tran-
scendental reduction, which must not be confounded with the
abstractive restricting of anthropological research to purely psychic
life.”


40. On the importance of transcendental phenomenology for the perva-
sive discussion and implementation of “meaning” in continental
philosophy, see Steven Galt Crowell, Husserl, Heidegger, and the
Space of Meaning: Paths Toward Transcendental Phenomenology

41. I flesh out this concept, forged by Quentin Meillassoux, in Chapter
3. Here it is enough to cite After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of
Contingency, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 5: Cor-
relationism is “the idea according to which we only ever have access to
the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term
considered apart from the other.”

42. This reduction, first introduced in The Idea of Phenomenology, is
meant to exclude consideration of the transcendent existence of
the world and its contents. It effectively restricts phenomenology
to consideration of what is immanent to consciousness, just as the
epoché introduced in Ideas effectively neutralizes (“reduces”) our
natural/naïve belief in objective reality.

43. As the editors of The Speculative Turn indicate in their intro-
duction, the speculative turn in contemporary philosophy is not
only philosophically, but also rhetorically, a “deliberate counterpoint to the now tiresome ‘Linguistic Turn’.” Levi Bryant et al., eds., The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 1.

44. Immanence in the phenomenological sense means that subject, object, and contemplation of the object by the subject are “really [reell] included in one another,” as Heidegger says, explicating Husserl’s Ideas. Put otherwise, immanence means that consciousness and object form an indivisible unity within lived experience, and it is this unity that is the locus of phenomenological investigation. Heidegger, History of the Concept of Time, 96–7. For a critique of this construal of immanence, see Gilles Deleuze, Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2005).


46. Zahavi, Husserl’s Phenomenology, 71.

47. Leonard Lawlor, Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 149. Lawlor follows Eugen Fink, “Die Phänomenologische Philosophie E. Husserl in der Gegenwärtigen Kritik,” Kantstudien 38, no. 3/4 (1933). Lawlor takes from Fink the idea that phenomenology comes to an end as soon as the reduction is abandoned. Without the reduction phenomenology turns into dogmatism.


52. As Bryant et al. see it, the “correlationist turn” originates “in Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy, which famously abjured the possibility of ever knowing a noumenal realm beyond human access . . . This effacement of the noumenal continues with phenomenology, as ontology becomes explicitly linked with a reduction to the phenomenal realm.” The Speculative Turn, 4. See also Lee Braver, A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

53. Bryant et al., The Speculative Turn, 3.
54. As Graham Harman has pointed out, it is necessary to keep SR and OOP separate, even though they tend to merge together in the discussion. For the sake of clarity, I am understanding speculative realism as an umbrella term under which falls object-oriented philosophy (most often associated with Harman’s position). Graham Harman, “Brief SR/OOO Tutorial,” in *Bells and Whistles* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013).
Since its first appearance at a London colloquium in 2007, the speculative realism movement has taken continental philosophy by storm. Opposing the formerly ubiquitous modern dogma that philosophy can speak only of the human-world relation rather than the world itself, speculative realism defends the autonomy of the world from human access in a spirit of imaginative audacity.

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