

## Editorial Introduction

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The relatively new movements in contemporary Continental philosophy that fall under the labels of speculative realism (SR) and object-oriented ontology (OOO) pose a serious challenge to phenomenology. By placing phenomenology under the heading of correlationism, proponents of these movements attempt to move away from epistemological questions of access, and to renew interest in metaphysical inquiry. According to these new realists, phenomenology would, by definition, only be able to study things as they are experienced by us, that is, things insofar as they are correlate of our own experience, and would be unable to speak of things as they are in themselves. According to SR and OOO, this reduction of things to things-for-us leads to disastrous consequences not only philosophically but also for the world we inhabit. Indeed, this reduction takes the form of human exceptionalism—things are only worthy of attention insofar as they are related to human concerns since we, human beings, are the measure of all things—which in its turn prepares the ground for technological exploitation, the exploitation of non-humans, and environmental crisis to emerge.

The impetus behind this special issue of *PhænEx* is to create a space for phenomenologically-minded philosophers to engage with the new realist philosophies. It is fair to say that the dialogue between phenomenology and the new realisms has so far been unproductive at best, and deaf at worst. That exchange of ideas between proponents of each philosophical position is difficult is evidenced, for example, by the publication of Dan Zahavi's article "The End of What? Phenomenology vs. Speculative Realism"<sup>1</sup> and some of the reactions it has given rise to. The title of Zahavi's piece was a play on Tom Sparrow's book *The End of Phenomenology*, in which he argued that phenomenology has become so diffused it may lack a clear telos and is made irrelevant. Speculative realism, on the other hand, "mines and adapts the resources of phenomenology, [and] has taken up phenomenology's call to get us back to reality, but without distracting us from the demand for metaphysical accountability."<sup>2</sup> Sparrow finds that

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<sup>1</sup> See Dan Zahavi's "The end of what? Phenomenology and Speculative Realism."

<sup>2</sup> Sparrow, 12.

phenomenology offers a timid realism that lacks credibility and is problematic. To him, speculative realism is simply better equipped to respond to the challenge of realism. Zahavi, by contrast, argues that recent criticisms of phenomenology, such as Sparrow's, are either superficial and simplistic—they do not engage the texts and hence miss key differences internal to phenomenology—or they lack novelty—these criticisms are already found within the phenomenological movement or have been raised by analytic philosophers and empirical scientists since the inception of phenomenology.

Indeed, Zahavi reminds us that if one is attacking phenomenology from a scientific or metaphysical realist perspective, one is merely rehearsing analytic philosophy's critique of phenomenology. On the other hand, phenomenology also has a long tradition of critique of scientific and metaphysical realism. Reversing Sparrow's conclusion, Zahavi claims that if we are looking for an affirmation of the reality of everyday objects (of the natural world), speculative realism "fails miserably." He further claims that phenomenology is methodologically better equipped to account for the real world in its familiarity as well as its strangeness. Addressing Zahavi's article, Sparrow affirms that Zahavi is wrong to see phenomenology as a "pure adversary" of SR, at least in the form it takes in Harman's and his own work. Speculative realism would be a "loosely associated series of attempts to draw out the limits of phenomenology."<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Sparrow seems to imply that Zahavi's criticism of speculative realism has missed the mark because it has not engaged directly with the arguments developed to support their varied metaphysical positions. Zahavi's position appears as a reactionary defence of orthodox phenomenology against the creative appropriation (some would say distortion) of phenomenology in Harman and Sparrow. In this vein, Harman sees in Zahavi "the phenomenology gatekeeper of [his] generation."<sup>4</sup>

In June 2016 we hosted a day-long panel at the EPTC conference to tackle these questions and invited our contributors to offer responses to speculative realism and its critique of phenomenology. The title of the panel was "Back to Phenomenology Itself?" The question mark in the title is of note. What was in question for us was the relevance of phenomenology for our philosophical inquiries and contemporary problems. We therefore asked the speakers to explore the resources found within phenomenology, including feminist and realist phenomenology, to take up the challenge posed by SR and OOO and contribute to the renewed focus on matter and objects. We wanted to initiate a dialogue between speculative realism and object-oriented ontology and thinkers in the phenomenological tradition broadly construed, but we did not want to presume how this dialogue was

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<sup>3</sup> "Interview with Tom Sparrow."

<sup>4</sup> DeLanda and Harman, 1.

going to take place or even if it was possible at all in the first place. Should phenomenologists, for example, point to the letter of Husserl's or Heidegger's texts and attempt to dispel any misunderstandings? In a sense, it is fairly easy to show that this or that thinker did not get this or that concept in Husserl or Heidegger right. But the new realists can as easily reply that it is not what matters. What matters is how humans think and engage with the non-human world. As such, the new realists are not so much trying to get the philosophers of the past right. Rather, they are attempting to shock us out of our anthropocentric ways of thinking for the sake of a more equal or more just future world. The debate is about which method allows us to get back "to the things themselves." It is about whether we should go back to phenomenology, and phenomenology "itself", in its traditional form, or whether we should abandon phenomenology once and for all in favour of SR or OOO, or whether it is not rather necessary to transform phenomenology from within.

Another possible avenue for the dialogue would be for phenomenologists to read the new realists' texts carefully and engage with their arguments on their own terms. This seems to be what Sparrow finds missing in Zahavi's article. But is this possible? In some way, the basic assumptions behind both philosophical movements are so far apart that it seems impossible to gain enough common ground to even start arguing about specific claims. But in this case, should we not rather give up on engaging with the new realist thinkers altogether? Is there still some value in reading their works and taking on the challenge they pose to phenomenology? Does all this talk of correlationism and ancestral statements for example not result in a distortion of phenomenology? Or does it allow us to reframe phenomenology in a productive way, highlighting some of its strengths that might have gone unnoticed or forgotten?

At the same time, the encounter between phenomenology and speculative realism might allow us to point out the limit of the phenomenological method—whether we want to accept this limit or overcome it. One suggestion made by Anna Mudde at the panel, is that the real shortcoming of phenomenology, when the time comes to think non-human objects, is the genuine incapacity for a human consciousness to experience the world from a perspective radically other than its own. Despite the radically different ways in which they conceive of consciousness or of the subject, phenomenologists agree that, as intentional, consciousness is related to objects but is not itself an object. As intentional, consciousness relates to and experiences objects, but it does so always as subject and never as object. Even though the subject knows what it is like to relate *to* object—indeed it might be nothing else than this relation—it seems that it can never know what it is like to relate *as* an object. Can we alienate ourselves so completely that we think not of objects but as objects ourselves? Is not such an alien thinking a radical impossibility that any

“object-oriented” philosophy has to contend with? No matter how we conceive of the subject—as intentional consciousness, as ambiguous embodied consciousness, as a prism and filter that enables phenomena to appear, and so on—it remains trapped within itself.

Here, there might be a third avenue for dialogue, one that, without going as far as SR and OOO, lets phenomenology be provoked by this question of object-thinking. Some of the thought experiments offered by OOO, such as wondering what it is like for a house to experience having humans in it,<sup>5</sup> can open our thinking to issues that are beyond the grasp of the phenomenological method. It might offer us a way to talk about materiality that helps point to reality in a different way. For those not content with remaining within the confines of phenomenology, it would offer a welcome addition to a phenomenology that does not concern itself enough with objects in themselves or the materiality (or object-like nature) of our beings in itself. This dialogue might give rise to a phenomenOOology, one that accepts the challenge of thinking about what we purportedly cannot think about, while hanging on to the subjective experience we have as conscious beings, no matter how we conceive of that consciousness. A phenomenOOology would be a philosophical position emerging out of a genuine dialogue between SR/OOO and phenomenology. It would be one that would not balk at the weaknesses identified in each philosophical position but would seek to remedy them by complementing each view.

The articles included in this special issue of *PhænEx* continue the discussion we began at the panel over a year ago. They all tackle the new realist challenge and offer varying views on how to respond to it. They all agree that the charge of correlationism advanced by SR and OOO, with Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman as the main proponents of these views, is unfounded or at least problematic. Interestingly they also take a healthy critical stance toward phenomenology and point to some weaknesses in the method and theoretical positions embraced by phenomenologists.

The first three articles respond to the charge of correlationism leveled at phenomenologists such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and Marion. In the text that opens this thematic section, G. Anthony Bruno argues that Meillassoux’s criticism of Heideggerian phenomenology rests on a misreading that neglects the role of the ontological difference in Heidegger’s philosophy. Specifically, Meillassoux fails to distinguish the ontic correlation of subject and object from the ontological co-manifestation of being and Dasein that is the condition of the former correlation. In so

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<sup>5</sup> This is a thought experiment Ian Bogost discusses at some length in his *Alien Phenomenology: What Is It Like To Be a Thing*.

doing, Meillassoux attributes to Heidegger a more extreme position of absolutizing the subject-object correlation and denying our ability to think the real world independently of the way it is presented to human subjects. This misreading, Bruno argues, stems from Meillassoux's assumption of the truth of transcendental realism, which is revealed in his argument regarding the "arche-fossil." This assumption is particularly problematic, Bruno points out, because it is the post-Kantian critique of this very notion that partly motivates Heidegger's own brand of empirical realism.

J. Leavitt Pearl also challenges Meillassoux's critique of phenomenology developed in his 2008 book, *After Finitude*, arguing that in that work Meillassoux mischaracterizes phenomenological givenness, which is portrayed as originating within the subject. By examining the notion of phenomenological givenness in Husserl, Heidegger, and Marion, Pearl points out that, in every instance, givenness is defined by heterogeneity—it refers to what is given to us, not to what emerges from us. Far from precluding our access to the unconditioned, external reality, phenomenological givenness enables us to grasp this reality in the terms in which it gives itself to us.

Robert Booth takes up a range of anti-correlationist criticisms of phenomenology, including those of Meillassoux, Harman, Sparrow, Morton, and Shaviro. By turning to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Booth argues that these criticisms either miss the mark entirely or are inconsequential. Contrary to the anti-correlationist charge, Booth shows, Merleau-Ponty does retain inescapable categories of truth and reality, but these are grounded in perceptual co-expression of a shared world rather than transcendent acquaintance with a world-in-itself. Moreover, rather than limiting thought of the real, Merleau-Ponty's commitment to shared embodiment does justice to the reality of the non-human world and the alterity of worldly entities. At the same time, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is sufficiently reflective to avoid recasting in a new hierarchical form the traditional dualism of subject/object, or thought/world.

The remaining three articles, rather than defending phenomenology against the attacks of SR and OOO, seek to critically advance the realist program by turning to feminist, post-phenomenological and critical methodologies. Anna Mudde takes up Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology for its critique of the philosophies of access and its proposed non-anthropocentric ontology where human beings no longer occupy a privileged place in the ontological order. At the same time, Mudde shifts the emphasis away from a merely theoretical approach to ontology and inquires into the possibilities of practicing such a de-centralized ontology. Specifically, by turning to Haraway's theory of companion species, as well as to the phenomenological conception of being-with other things, she

investigates the possibilities of conceiving of and practicing being human as a companion object in mutual prehension with other beings and objects.

Susanna Lindberg, for her part, brings together speculative realist, phenomenological, and post-phenomenological approaches by focusing on three contemporary techno-ontologies. Specifically, through an analysis of Levi Bryant's "onto-cartography," Graham Harman's "tool-being," and Jean-Luc Nancy's "ecotechnology," she argues that the concept of technics is a useful one insofar as it allows us to think being in terms of plurality, becoming, contingency, and materiality. These techno-ontologies, Lindberg argues, succeed in avoiding theological and nihilistic implications while at the same time challenging overly reductive, naturalistic varieties of materialism.

Finally, Dustin Zielke takes up the challenge of realism as formulated by Meillassoux and Harman. Through an approach he terms "critical phenomenology," Zielke attempts to delimit the real from the intentional relation. He grants that the real refers to the actual existing, material things that are independent of the intentional relation, with intentionality being a contingent feature of the real. Nevertheless, according to Zielke, human beings experience the realness of the real—the excess and withdrawal of all things—through their practical activity of striving to survive in the universe. Consequently, Zielke argues, phenomenology is better suited than any speculative approach to grant us knowledge of the real.

We hope that the articles in this special issue will contribute to transforming the current dialogue of the deaf between phenomenology and SR and OOO into a fruitful dialogue.

### Works Cited

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