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Phenomenology as Eschatological Materialism

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The ‘theological’ turn in phenomenology has proven somewhat controversial, both within phenomenology¹ and for theology.² Given that phenomenology is allegedly concerned with the ‘things themselves,’ and that theology is concerned with speaking about God, how can phenomenology speak about theological matters without making God a ‘thing,’ the object of an experience, thereby missing, perhaps, what is essential about God? On this thinking, ‘theological’ phenomenology either renders God an object able to be studied phenomenologically, in which case it is unorthodoxly theological; or, it leaves God, the ‘object’ of its phenomenological investigation, non-objectified, thereby rendering the movement insufficiently phenomenological.

In this paper, I will try to circumvent the second claim and, by so doing, hope to contribute something to the first claim as well. That is, by showing how ‘theological’ phenomenology is in fact rigorously phenomenological, I hope to prove not only its phenomenological weight, but also to show where it might make contributions to theological discourse. To do this, I will examine a major thread of ‘theological’ phenomenology: the turn to eschatology.³ While eschatology has become a major talking point in ‘theological’ phenomenology—from Kearney’s micro-eschatology to Lacoste’s *parousia*, Marion’s Eucharistic eschatology and even, perhaps,

1. The most famous example of this controversy in phenomenology is perhaps Dominique Janicaud’s “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” trans. Bernard G. Prusak, in Janicaud, et. al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 16–103.

2. As evidenced by, e.g., Radical Orthodoxy’s sometimes difficult reception of phenomenological figures; cf., e.g., John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1990).

3. Cf. DeRoo and Manoussakis, (eds.), *Phenomenology and Eschatology: Not yet in the Now* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009) for a series of examinations of this theme.

Caputo's Messianic—its roots lay, not in theological accounts of the *eschaton*, but in the phenomenological exploration of time. To begin, then, we must root eschatology firmly in phenomenology's understanding of time. In doing so, we will come to see that not only is eschatology an essential aspect of phenomenological time, but that it thereby proves to be essential to properly understanding time-consciousness, and therefore intentionality, that major breakthrough of phenomenology (Section I). Given the necessity of eschatology to intentionality, and hence to phenomenology itself, one cannot argue that eschatology is added to phenomenology from outside, but rather one can see that it is essentially phenomenological. As essentially phenomenological, however, it necessarily is at odds with a certain materialism that seems to be gaining credence, not only in the natural sciences, but in the general culture at large. By infusing the material with the immaterial (and vice versa), phenomenological intentionality not only goes beyond the Cartesian dualism that still characterizes our common sense understanding of materialism, but it also introduces the idea of an eschatological materialism that accords nicely with theological accounts of created reality and recent investigations of the possibility of religious materialism (Section II). Hence phenomenology reveals itself to be an essentially eschatological materialism in a way that is enlightening to both philosophy and theology.

I. Phenomenology, Eschatology, Intentionality

For phenomenology, time is the essence of subjectivity: while all else depends in part on stimulus from elsewhere, Husserl will argue, time alone is constituted purely within the subject. For Husserl, this manifests itself in the 'empty'⁴ temporal formality of retention-impression-protention. This complex phenomena is entirely formal: what is retained in a retention is the previous protention, which is then fulfilled (even as it may be simultaneously disappointed) by the conjunction of an impression and the simultaneous retention of that previous protention. This conjunction, in turn, contains its

4. Edmund Husserl, *Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten 1918–1926*. Ed. M. Fleischer (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 128. Translated by Anthony J. Steinbock as *Analyses concerning Active and Passive Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*. (Dordrecht/Boston/ London: Kluwer Academic, 2001).

own protention which must then be retained in the next instant as fulfillment via an impression, and so on, to a certain infinity.⁵

But of course the temporality of our experience is not empty. Hence, the impression provides the content (from the world) that is then retained and which can be protended (or expected). However, this content must always come to us within the structure (or strictures) of our formal temporality of expectations, retentions and fulfillments. This is to say that our experience must make sense to us by appealing, somehow, to two sets of horizons: those of formal time-consciousness, and those of experiential expectation. In this latter sense, it is only because what confronts us now reminds us of previous similar situations that we are able to confront the present in a way that makes sense, rather than as a raw jumble of senseless data: I see the thing before me as a chair because previous experience habituates me to encounter these kinds of objects as certain kinds of things (i.e., chairs) that can be expected to have certain kinds of properties (e.g., three-dimensional extension, ability to hold the weight of an average adult, etc.).

On this horizontal model, we can say that our temporality proceeds directly from the past and present toward the future. The future here marks that time which will at one point be the ‘now’ of experience, but is not yet. That is, the future is some moment that has not yet come, but will come in a sequential relationship to the present. This can be expressed mathematically on the model of $t + 1, t + 2, \dots t + n$.

But this is not the only sense of the future at work in phenomenological conceptions of temporality. In addition to this idea of time as operating within horizons, Levinas develops the notion of time as eschatological. This invocation of eschatology emerges in Levinas’ attempt to take seriously the Husserlian concepts of intentionality, impression, and sensation.⁶ In its most basic form, eschatological time in phenomenology refers to the necessity that the ‘closed’ system of internal time-constitution is acted upon by that which comes from outside itself. Where Husserl limited this external influence only to the constitution of the world and of judgments—thereby

5. Husserl discusses the nature of this infinity in *Die Bernauer Manuskripte über das Zeitbewusstsein (1917/1918)*. Ed. R. Bernet and D. Lohmar (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic, 2001), 277–278.

6. Cf. the essays in Levinas, *Discovering Existence With Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

leaving inner time-constitution, the most basic level of the subject, intact—Levinas sets out to show that even in its most basic self-constitution, the subject is acted upon by alterity, by that which is wholly different than itself. According to Levinas, the subject discovers that its relation to its own internal time is not that of free constitution, but is rather that of responsibility and alterity: I discover, in the ‘flow’ of my very basic lived experience, that my subjectivity is not my own, but is rather a response to a world that is always already endowed with sense by a (human) Other. My very subjectivity—that is, my ability to make sense of the world as my experience of the world—is not a self-given power, but is rather an ability I have that results from a pre-primordial experience of relation to an Other.⁷

The eschatological conception of time in phenomenology then entails, not a focus on a future time that remains yet to come (the ‘end times’ of the *eschaton*, for example), but rather elaborates the fact that the very presentness of the present time is itself always already infused with a certain relation to otherness that makes a purely-present present impossible.⁸ Eschatological time, in phenomenology, reminds us that the future is not only something we are moving toward, but is something that constantly interrupts the present right now. The future is not only that time which has not yet come, but is also the aspect of the not-yet in the now⁹ that helps shape and constitute the now.

This two-fold sense of the future allows temporality to constitute the most basic element of subjectivity. On the one hand, the fact that I can only make sense of things as they appear within my horizons of expectation reveals the subject’s role in constituting the world. On the other hand, those horizons of expectation are themselves constituted by the subject’s relation to other people, and these relations, in turn, constitute the very subjectivity of the subject itself (most notably, in the constitution of inner

7. To use an empirical example, the child’s ability to make sense of the world arises only because it gains linguistic and semantic categories from its previous relations with other people. We can make sense of the world only after we have learned to make sense from others.

8. This is the core of Derrida’s discussion of *differance* in *Speech and Phenomena* and elsewhere.

9. Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins (1893–1917)*. Ed. R. Boehm (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 77, 373. Translated by John Barnett Brough as *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of internal time*. Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic, 1991.

time-consciousness). Because temporality, as discussed by Husserl and developed by Levinas, is a matter of both operating within horizons as well as having those horizons already-been-shattered by the very thing that makes them possible (i.e., the relation with alterity that enables the subject to make sense of the world), temporality—with its futural focus—is able to achieve the double-intentionality necessary for the phenomenological concept of intentionality. Intentionality is the name given to the idea that consciousness is always consciousness of... , and therefore that the knowing subject and the known world are always already in contact. This can be the case only if one act can simultaneously constitute the subject and the world, thereby entailing that their connection precedes their distinction. As we have seen, this act is achieved in the two-fold account of temporality, and therefore it is only because phenomenological time is both horizontal *and eschatological* that intentionality can emerge from phenomenology. Eschatological time is essential to the functioning and self-understanding of phenomenology.¹⁰

II. Intentionality and Materialism

So far, we have established that eschatology is an essential part of phenomenology. From this, we can conclude that the recent ‘turn’ to eschatology in phenomenology is not necessarily the result of some ‘swerve’ away from rigorous phenomenology, but could, instead, be merely the making-explicit of phenomenology’s continued attempts at self-understanding. That is, the eschatological focus of ‘theological’ phenomenology remains orthodoxly and rigorously phenomenological—even as it suggests that phenomenology need not always be an objectifying process.

How, then, can ‘theological’ phenomenology provide a point of contact with general theological discourse? One answer, I think, lies in phenomenology’s implicit rejection of reductive materialism in favour of an eschatological materialism that fails to maintain the sharp distinction between immaterial mind and material bodies. By claiming that both the subject and the world are constituted in intentionality, phenomenology

10. I develop this in much more detail than is necessary here in *Futurity in Phenomenology: Promise and Method in Husserl, Levinas and Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

rejects the claim that the (physical) world constitutes the subject, a claim that is essential to the reductive materialist project.¹¹ It does not, however, reject materialism outright, in favour of a speculative idealism, for example. Rather, phenomenology embraces the material precisely by viewing it in essential relationship with the immaterial: there is no inert matter, divorced from sense, except in abstraction. All matter, in experience and hence in (lived) reality, is sense-imbued matter, that is, matter always already infused with the immaterial; and all immaterial processes bear necessary connections to the material. This reflexivity is what is meant when we say that the subject and the world are both constituted—made sense of—in the one act of intentionality.

This is not to say that there is no such thing as physical existence, nor that such existence cannot be understood by way of chemical composition, atomic structure, etc. It merely says that such existence is but one aspect or avenue of sense that we can find in the world (or, perhaps better, one way in which we can make sense of the world), but in no way a privileged or superior mode of sense. Quite to the contrary, understanding the world in strictly (reductively) materialist terms is very much a secondary and abstracted way of seeing the world: it assumes something like the mathematical idealization first proposed by Galileo in which the entire world comes to be judged, not as it initially appears, but as it can be abstracted and ‘purified’ via scientific and mathematical models.¹² While useful, perhaps, for science (and this is itself debatable), such a ‘scientific’ or ‘mathematical’ model of the world is nonetheless a model, that is, an application or attribution of immaterial sense in order to constitute the ‘material’ world: the objects of science are, in this regard, ideal objects and not material objects at all. Like the ideal triangle in geometry, the ‘thing itself’ (or the ‘way things are’) is a scientifically useful model that is qualitatively distinct from the actual things in the world (and, therefore, from the physical things in the laboratory also). And, as in geometry, we must explicitly understand the relationship between ideal and

11. I have in mind here evolutionary reductionism, especially as it manifests itself in the work of someone like Richard Dawkins (cf., for example, Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976]).

12. Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Der Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die Phänomenologische Philosophie*. Ed. W. Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954), §§ 8–9. Translated by David Carr as *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

real objects if the developments occasioned by the study of the ideal objects are to have any meaning whatsoever in the world at large.

Phenomenology, in contrast, strives to ensure that we remember not only the difference but also the connection between ideal and real objects. This is to say that phenomenology—with its notion of intentionality that itself is premised, in part, on an eschatological view of time—maintains that the notion of ‘pure’ matter is an ideal and abstract notion, and that all real matter is in fact imbued with nonmaterial sense, just as all nonmaterial sense has a material substrate.

But how does such a view help contribute to theology? I would suggest that the picture of materialism that phenomenology provides appreciates and deepens theological understandings of the world as created reality. By viewing material as created, theology claims that the material world always exhibits the divine wisdom or divine plan of its Creator.¹³ This is to say that the ‘sense’ of the material world is not exhausted by its objective structure, but rather that objective structure itself gains its sense only within a larger model of the world and of reality. This, in turn, opens up a richer, more diverse understanding of created reality itself, in which the objectivism of reductive materialism is but one aspect or ‘mode’ of the created order.¹⁴ While this mode can be understood in distinction from other modes, this is always in abstraction from its more natural, integrated nature. That is, the differing modes of creation are best understood integrally, rather than disjunctively, and this because their status as created entails a deeper sense than mere material ‘stuff.’

This (phenomenologically) deepened account of created reality is beneficial to theology in multiple ways. For one, this understanding of the world will obviously be at odds with the materialism of the ‘New Atheism’ of Dawkins and Hitchens. But this critique can now be understood from a scientific and not merely a theological perspective. This distinction is

13. Cf. Al Wolters, *Creation Regained* second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), especially chapter 2, for more on the relationship between creation and divine wisdom.

14. For more on this idea of a ‘modal ontology,’ cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* trans. David H. Freeman and H. DeJongste (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij H. J. Paris, and Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955); cf. especially volume 2, *The General Theory of the Modal Spheres*. The notion of a modal ontology also emerges in the phenomenology of Nicolai Hartmann; cf. *Ontologie*, (4 Volumes) (Berlin-Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1935–1950).

crucial here to the extent that the New Atheists tend to oppose religion to science as one opposes childish superstition to adult critical thinking.¹⁵ By showing that science (via phenomenology) does not support a reductive materialism, but instead supports the more complex picture of an integrated reality suggested by creationist¹⁶ accounts of the world, phenomenology has an apologetic value for theology.

Beyond this apologetic value, however, the deepened account of created reality suggested by phenomenology also opens the door to a positive theological recovery of materialism. Of course, this will no longer be the reductive materialism of Dawkins et. al., but rather a spiritual, religious, or theological materialism, where “spiritual” no longer indicates a second kind of thing in contrast to the material (as it did for Descartes), but rather indicates the complex dynamic of material and immaterial within the material itself that is presented in phenomenology and in accounts of creation. Indeed, some theologians will go so far as to say that reductive materialism “is simply not as materialist as theological materialism.”¹⁷ The precise nature of this theological materialism varies widely, from the neo-Platonic “participatory” materialism of John Milbank¹⁸ to the “kenotic” materialism of Slavoj Žižek¹⁹ and Gianni Vattimo,²⁰ from the “mode of

15. Cf., for example, Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), 350.

16. Which must be kept distinct from Creationist accounts, which view the first chapter of Genesis as a scientific account of the origin of the world. By focusing on the modal complexity of created reality, phenomenology helps point out the need to distinguish between different senses (different intending acts, different modes of givenness, etc.) of the world. In this regard, it suggests that Genesis might provide a theological account of the origin of the world that can be true without trying to be a material account of the origin of the world; in this regard, we can read Genesis 1 as theology without having to read it as pseudo-biology.

17. This is Milbank’s main claim in his debate with Žižek, staged in Milbank and Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

18. Cf. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

19. Cf. Milbank and Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*.

20. Cf. Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca d’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

materialization” of Caputo²¹ to James K.A. Smith’s “logic of incarnation,”²² but all of these materialisms are at least partially rooted in both the phenomenological tradition and in Christology and Trinitarian thought (even if these things are re-imagined in non-traditional ways by some). Indeed, this post-phenomenological resurgence of theology in relation to materialism has manifested itself even in non-religious European thinkers like Badiou and Agamben, whose recent dalliances with St. Paul have made waves in both philosophical and theological circles.²³

The critique and re-imagination of materialism, while particularly relevant in the contemporary theological scene, is not the only way in which phenomenology’s ‘theological’ turn has proven beneficial for theology, however. The distinct nature of eschatology as it functions within phenomenology takes a position in favour of certain theological accounts of eschatology over others. By offering a two-fold account of temporality, phenomenology provides a criticism of the temporality of $t + n$ (in which time moves always (and solely) from the past, through the present, to the future) that undergirds, not just the reductive materialist position but also dispensationalist and futurist accounts of the *eschaton*, which view it as a historical fact that will one day be present (the way the present is here right now), though that day has not yet come.²⁴ By offering an alternative, kairological conception of time, phenomenology offers a theory of

21. Cf. John D. Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology,” *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* [Spring 2011], esp. § 15.

22. Cf. Smith, “The Logic of Incarnation: Toward a Catholic Postmodernism,” in DeRoo and Lightbody (eds.), *The Logic of Incarnation: James K.A. Smith’s Critique of Postmodern Religion* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009), 3–37.

23. Cf. Badiou, *St Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), and Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). For its reception in philosophical and theological circles, cf. Caputo and Alcock (eds.), *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) and Milbank, Žižek and Davis, *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010).

24. This understanding of the *eschaton* is often based on a “scientific” rather than theological reading of the book of *Revelation*, and has its most popular (if not necessarily its most scholarly rigorous) manifestation in the *Left Behind* series of novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (published by Tyndale House, and now numbering 16 books with over 63 million copies in print). Futurism, as a way of interpreting the book of *Revelation*, was inaugurated

temporality that can help make sense of the eschatologies of figures like Moltmann, Rahner, and Zizioulas who sought to make eschatology a key aspect of theological thought in the 20th century.

On the horizontal temporality of $t + n$ that phenomenology critiques, the future provides nothing to the present, save, perhaps, the possibility of hope or despair in regard to particular conditions. The past also has no value for the present, except to show us how we arrived at one historical position rather than another.²⁵ This lack of historicity shows itself most clearly in the view that truth can be judged a-temporally, and that the historical development of our ideas (e.g., in science) is less important than the (eternal) validity of those ideas in the present. This theory of temporality undergirds fundamentalism in its various guises, be they Christian, Islamic or Scientific.²⁶ By critiquing this temporality, phenomenology not only supports certain theological eschatologies over others but also suggests new standards for truth in theological circles. These standards can be broadly deemed eschatological, focusing on the structures of reality only insofar as those structures are understood as dynamic. This is not merely a process theology, but rather suggests a thoroughly complex, multiform yet integrated picture of reality. This is to say, this theory of truth does not presume that truth must build itself up (or unveil itself) slowly over time—with the assumption still remaining, it seems, that the truth, so built up or unveiled must be considered eternally valid (even if it must be temporally indexed). Rather, this suggests that truth is, perhaps, not the kind of thing (e.g., a proposition) that can be judged a-temporally, but instead requires a thorough reimagining of what it means for something to be true.²⁷ Just as the notion of eschatology at work in phenomenology enables us to think of eternity as the alterity inherent in presence (in addition to understanding

by Francisco Ribera with the publication in 1590 of his commentary on *Revelation*, entitled *In Sacrum Beati Ioannis Apostoli, & Evangelistiae Apocalypsin Commentarij*.

25. This view underlies some of the more fundamentalist Protestant denominations' view of the sufficiency of Scripture without any need for tradition as an instrument of interpretation.

26. Gianni Vattimo argues against such a view of biblical interpretation—and in truth in general—in favour of a more tradition-friendly account in *After Christianity*.

27. For one example of such a re-imagining of truth, cf. Lambert Zuidervaart, *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse and Imaginative Disclosure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

it as everlastingness), is also enables us to reconceive of truth along non-epistemic lines.²⁸

Conclusion

The eschatological dimension of phenomenology deepens our understanding of key phenomenological themes such as intentionality and time-consciousness, and so reveals a non-objectifying manner of disclosure, of being-constituted, that is necessarily at work in the phenomenological domain. In doing so, not only does it show that ‘theological’ phenomenology remains rigorously phenomenological, but it also opens the possibility of a non-objectifying, but still phenomenological, exploration of God that has significant insights for theology. This has enabled ‘theological’ phenomenology to not only engage with traditional theological tropes (e.g., eschatology, creation, biblical interpretation), but also has helped theology re-examine its accounts of materialism and truth in ways that suggest new boundaries of theological discourse moving forward. In doing so, ‘theological’ phenomenology, and its eschatological materialism, has proven beneficial for both phenomenology and theology.

28. A project undertaken in theology by John D. Caputo in *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

