

## TOWARDS AN ECSTATIC COSMOLOGY: HUSSERL, SPECULATIVE REALISM, AND THE OUTLINES OF A NEW PHENOMENOLOGICAL NATURALISM

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the challenge Quentin Meillassoux has posed to phenomenology with his critique of correlationism. Meillassoux argues that transcendental phenomenology, which focuses on the correlation between thought and being, is anti-realist and that it cannot provide a philosophical basis for the real objects of scientific investigation. Because of this, he argues that when it comes to scientific statements about pre-terrestrial phenomena (such as the formation of the solar system), phenomenology collapses into another form of Berkeleyian idealism. Taking Edmund Husserl's idealist phenomenology as a test case, I argue that Meillassoux's critique of phenomenology is misguided because Husserl's project was an *epistemic* idealism that sought (in part) to establish or philosophically justify the reality of the transcendent world. Nevertheless, Meillassoux's challenge to phenomenology once again forces contemporary phenomenologists to confront the troubled encounter between their tradition and naturalism. I conclude by mapping out the problematic of a transcendental cosmology, called ecstatic cosmology, that would seek to show the unity between the material being of the physical universe and constituting subjectivity split between its own material and metaphysical possibilities.

**Keywords:** Speculative realism; Quentin Meillassoux; Correlationism; The ancestral phenomenology; Edmund Husserl; Realism; Idealism; Anti-realism; Epistemic idealism; Natural attitude; Phenomenological reduction; Transcendental phenomenology; Naturalism; Transcendental subjectivity; Materialism; Ecstatic materialism; Ecstatic cosmology

### INTRODUCTION: CORRELATIONISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Correlationism has become a derogatory catchword in many humanities and social science theory circles, especially of the realist, new materialist, and posthumanist types. It names a philosophical position that most prominently

came under critique in *After Finitude* (2011), the work of Alain Badiou's former student, Quentin Meillassoux.<sup>1</sup> Over the last decade, Meillassoux's critique of correlationism sparked an intellectual position known as speculative realism, which has been seeking to overcome what it takes to be the anti-realist character of Continental philosophy. According to Meillassoux and other speculative realists, transcendental philosophies such as the phenomenologies of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty can only access the correlation between a subject and an object and not either term 'in itself' apart from their relation. Because correlationism can only attend to the relation between being and thought, it apparently cannot yield a sufficiently realist position that affirms the independence of the world from the mind. The crux of the issue, Meillassoux argues, is that correlationism cannot provide philosophical justifications for the realist sense underlying scientific statements. According to him, correlationist phenomenology cannot ground scientific realism.

Recently, Dan Zahavi showed the limitations of speculative realism's critique of the phenomenological tradition.<sup>2</sup> According to Zahavi, this critique is too superficial and overly simplistic—not to mention unoriginal. Speculative realists like Meillassoux do not offer detailed analyses of phenomenologists, nor do they refer to the literature surrounding their work. Even when Meillassoux's followers, such as Tom Sparrow, do engage the tradition more thoroughly, according to Zahavi this is inaccurate, unclear, and "tendentious."<sup>3</sup> Zahavi's paper is intended as a review of the disagreement, so he only points to the development of a fuller defense of specific phenomenologists like Husserl. Nor does he attempt to show in detail *how* phenomenologists might respond to Meillassoux's worries about the grounding of scientific realism.

Of all the major phenomenologists, perhaps Husserl's transcendental idealism is most vulnerable to Meillassoux's critique. Yet as Zahavi has noted, how one

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<sup>1</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, New York, Continuum Books, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Zahavi, 'The End of What? Phenomenology vs. Speculative Realism,' *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2016, pp. 289–309, p. 203.

<sup>3</sup> Zahavi, 'The End of What?,' pp. 290–292.

should understand Husserl's idealism is far from clear.<sup>4</sup> The secondary literature is fractured with disagreement about whether his project is compatible with realism or not.<sup>5</sup> The speculative realist critique of Husserl thereby provides the opportunity to revisit this literature and reflect on the status of Husserl's project along with its realist implications. Of course, Husserl's work had various periods. But even at the height of his transcendental idealism, it is possible to see him seeking to philosophically ground the inherent realism of the natural attitude, doing precisely what Meillassoux claims it should not be able to do as a correlationist method. Thus, Meillassoux's critique misses his mark for two reasons. First, Meillassoux misrepresents Husserlian phenomenology because it was not a *metaphysical* idealism like Berkeley's, but an *epistemological* idealism that sought (at least in part) to establish the sense of the real world. As such, it does not (and at times only *seems* to) *ontologically* reduce the world to a mind-dependent status. Second, Meillassoux also misrepresents Husserlian phenomenology because, contrary to his claims, Husserl's work can indeed ground the realist sense of scientific claims, and what Meillassoux calls ancestral statements—statements about things or events that preceded the emergence of life on earth.<sup>6</sup> Husserl's project offers the possibility of transforming the naive realism of the natural attitude into a hard-won realism through the phenomenological method.

That said, one way in which speculative realism's critique of correlationism might provide an indirect benefit to phenomenology more broadly concerns the contemporary challenges the latter faces in responding to naturalism. This confrontation emerged in some of Husserl's earliest works with his critique of psychologism and continues on until today in discussions surrounding

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<sup>4</sup> Zahavi, 'The End of What?', p. 298.

<sup>5</sup> David Carr, *The Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999; Herman Philipse, 'Transcendental Idealism,' in Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; Steven Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Paths Toward Transcendental Phenomenology*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2001; Dan Zahavi, 'Phenomenology and Metaphysics,' In Dan Zahavi, Sara Heinämaa, and Hans Ruin (eds.) *Metaphysics, Facticity, Interpretation: Contributions to Phenomenology*, Boston, Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 3–22.

<sup>6</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 10.

neurophenomenology, phenomenologically oriented cognitive science, and any other area where the positive sciences and phenomenology meet. The main challenge that phenomenologists face with regard to the metaphysical realism of much contemporary naturalism is the way that it treats consciousness as one object amongst others in the cosmos. Husserl's early works such as *Philosophy as a Rigorous Science* was a rejection of this reductive position. Throughout his career he continued to insist on the transcendental status of consciousness—that it is a *necessary* condition of the possibility for appearance. At times, this can make it seem as if his position *was a metaphysical idealism* in the way that the speculative realists suggest. Untangling the sense of such moments can not only help reinforce Husserl's project as an *epistemological* idealism, but also point contemporary phenomenologists beyond Husserl's work into a novel way of engaging naturalism. If one is willing to revise the materialism to which metaphysical realism subscribes, then it need not be incompatible with transcendental philosophy. In fact, the two may meet in an *ecstatic cosmology*.

#### SPECULATIVE REALISM AND MEILLASSOUX'S CRITIQUE OF CORRELATIONISM

For those who identify as speculative realists and object oriented ontologists, Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* contains the definitive statement of the critique of correlationism.<sup>7</sup> Meillassoux defines correlationism as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never either term considered apart from the other...consequently, it becomes possible to say that every philosophy which disavows naive realism has become a variant of correlationism.”<sup>8</sup> Correlationism is any philosophical position, but most specifically transcendental philosophy, postmodernism, and phenomenology, which denies that the thinking subject encounters reality as it is in itself apart from the way it is for us. While Meillassoux admits that

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<sup>7</sup> Object oriented ontology is an offshoot of speculative realism. For its version of the critique of correlationism, see Graham Harman on the philosophy of “human access” in Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, Washington, Zero Books, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 5.

correlationists may indeed affirm that there *is* a real world outside of thought, he argues that the consistent correlationist cannot hold that this world exists independently from consciousness: “consciousness and language certainly transcend themselves towards the world, but there is a world only insofar as consciousness transcends itself towards it.”<sup>9</sup> Even though correlationists *can* affirm a transcendent reality, they *cannot* affirm *the mind-independent nature of this reality*.

Instead of carefully demonstrating these correlationist theses in the work of philosophers, Meillassoux identifies correlationism by characterizing its basic form of argumentation, which he calls the correlationist circle.<sup>10</sup> He offers a formal presentation of it in the following way: “there can be no X without a givenness of X, and no theory about X without a positing of X.”<sup>11</sup> His basic point is that correlationists cannot speak or think about something mind-independent, because this would amount to a performative contradiction—since any speaking or thinking would already imply the presence of the speaker or thinker. Correlationists collapse reality in itself into its givenness for an intentional subject. Throughout *After Finitude*, Meillassoux attempts to refute the correlationist circle and show that it is possible to know reality in itself, which he otherwise calls the great outdoors.<sup>12</sup>

Although he does not engage with the realist/constructivist debates within the philosophy of science, Meillassoux claims that the empirical sciences allow us to reach the great outdoors.<sup>13</sup> Thus, his substantive issue with correlationism and its correlationist circle is that it cannot ground or justify the realism of scientific statements.<sup>14</sup> He even goes so far as to equate correlationists (and phenomenologists) with creationists and Berkeleyian idealists.<sup>15</sup> While he admits

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<sup>9</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, ‘Time Without Becoming,’ <http://speculativeheresy.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/3729-time\ without\ becoming.pdf>, 2008, p. 1; Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Meillassoux, ‘Time Without Becoming,’ 2008, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> For this reason, I will also not engage with this literature. For the sake of argument, I will assume with Meillassoux that scientific statements require a realist sense.

<sup>14</sup> Meillassoux, ‘Time Without Becoming,’ 2008, p. 3; Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Meillassoux, ‘Time Without Becoming,’ 2008, p. 3; Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 18.

that phenomenology does in fact try to distinguish itself from the “crude idealism of the Berkeleyian variety;” he immediately adds that what he tried “to demonstrate in *After Finitude* is that every correlationism collapses into this crude idealism when it tries to think the significance of ancestry.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, he thinks that correlationism cannot ground the realism of geological, astronomical, cosmological, and other scientific theories about what he calls *the ancestral*. He defines the ancestral as “any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species,” and he offers four examples of ancestral theories proposed by the empirical sciences: that the universe is 13.5 billion years old, that the earth formed 4.56 billion years ago, that life originated on earth 3.5 billion years ago, and that the human species emerged 2 million years ago.<sup>17</sup> Meillassoux names the physical materials upon which present-day scientists can experiment and, thereby make claims about these ancestral events, arche-fossils. As an example of an arche-fossil, he points to a rock that contains isotopes ‘whose rate of decay we know’ and which scientists can use to date, for instance, the origin of the earth.<sup>18</sup>

We have already seen that Meillassoux admits that correlationists can affirm the reality of an existing world, but that he denies their capacity to affirm the mind-independence of this world. Similarly, he will also say that correlationists *can* affirm the truth of scientific, ancestral statements, but that they *cannot* affirm the mind-independent reality of the ancestral *referents* of these statements. Instead, even while one affirms the truth of ancestral statements, every consistent correlationist will, perhaps silently, qualify this claim with a codicil that re-inscribes the in itself of the referent back within an intentional relation. For instance, while the correlationist may very well affirm that the formation of the earth occurred 4.56 billion years ago, he/she will nevertheless add that this statement is made from the perspective of human being and so it only occurred “*for humans* (or even, for *the human scientist*).”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the correlationist doubles the meaning of the ancestral statement. On the one hand, the

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<sup>16</sup> Meillassoux, ‘Time Without Becoming,’ 2008, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 12.

correlationist retains its naive, literal, *epistemic* meaning so as to preserve a place for scientific truth. On the other hand, the correlationist *ontologically* decomposes this naivety into its critical subjective and intersubjective conditions. With this latter move, the correlationist reduces the real mind-independence and true anteriority of ancestral referents into the subjective and intersubjective conditions for their appearance; namely, the present scientific community's "retrojection of the past on the basis of the present."<sup>20</sup> In this doubling of meaning, correlationists introduce a "profound counter-sense" into the ancestral statement.<sup>21</sup> What the scientist intends literally and naively as having actually pre-existed all humanity (regardless of whether humans presently grasp it or not), the correlationist ontologically reduces to what can be presently given to a *de facto* subject. Thereby the sense of the objectivity and independent reality of the ancestral is lost, *since this objectivity should still hold even if no humans ever came into existence*. This is why Meillassoux claims that "correlationism can't give any sense to ancestral statements, and, consequently, to a science which is able to produce such statements."<sup>22</sup>

#### DEFENDING PHENOMENOLOGY AGAINST MEILLASSOUX

If Meillassoux expects his critique of correlationism to indeed be a critique of Husserlian phenomenology, then he will have to be sure that what he calls correlationism is consistent *with* Husserl's phenomenology. Otherwise, the critique will only be a straw man argument. There is definitely somewhat of a family resemblance between correlationism and phenomenology. For one thing, Meillassoux is at least partially correct in arguing that Husserlian phenomenology rejects both the pre-critical and the Kantian thing in itself, plus any philosophical position that claims to offer an absolute view from nowhere.<sup>23</sup> Meillassoux is also

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<sup>20</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> Meillassoux, 'Time Without Becoming,' 2008, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Dan Zahavi, 'Naturalized Phenomenology,' in Dan Zahavi (ed.) *Handbook of Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, New York, Springer, 2010, pp. 2–19; Dan Zahavi, 'Naturalized Phenomenology: A Desideratum or a Category Mistake,' *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, no. 72, 2013, pp. 23–42; Edmund Husserl, 'Kant

correct to point out that phenomenology emphasizes the correlation between subjective acts of consciousness and transcendent objectivity. Contemporary phenomenologists who are not concerned with speculative realism often present their projects as emphatically correlationist.<sup>24</sup>

However, Meillassoux's fuzzy characterizations are stated rather broadly, not taking into consideration the debates in the literature surrounding the interpretation of these ideas, their specific technical meanings, and/or their sense within Husserl's larger project. Furthermore, from the perspective of phenomenology, there is a glaring omission in Meillassoux's argument: he does not even consider the distinction between Husserl's idea of the natural attitude (with its naive realism) and the phenomenological reduction.<sup>25</sup> All of these problems converge within Meillassoux's characterization of the correlationist's treatment of scientific statements. While this may be an accurate representation of the way that *some* so-called correlationists treat scientific statements (especially during the heyday of postmodernism after the linguistic turn), it is surely not the way that Husserl would have treated them. The fact that Meillassoux places phenomenologists in the same boat as Berkeley and creationists should raise an alarm. As Markus Gabriel writes, "it should be the cause of great astonishment if the philosophers referred to as correlationists by Meillassoux, such as Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger were not capable of understanding that the sun has existed before man."<sup>26</sup> Astonishing indeed. Yet, the real challenge is to show *why* Meillassoux is wrong and *how* phenomenology can do what he says it cannot.

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and the Idea of Transcendental Philosophy,' *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1974, pp. 9–56, pp. 45–48.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance Renaud Barbaras, 'The Phenomenology of Life: Desire as the Being of the Subject,' in Dan Zahavi (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> More recently, Tom Sparrow, has picked up this omission and addressed the reduction explicitly. But as we will see, Sparrow's presentation remains thoroughly problematic and does not advance Meillassoux's cause.

<sup>26</sup> Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009, pp. 86–87.



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## HUSSERL'S TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM: THE NATURAL ATTITUDE AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION

The speculative realist critique of correlationism fails to be a critique of Husserlian phenomenology because it does not account for the crucial methodological difference between the philosophical mode of reflection and the naive realism of the natural attitude. Because of this, it misses the sense in which phenomenology is an analysis of the constitution of the sense, meaning, or truth of the real world, instead of a denial of its mind-independence *per se*.<sup>27</sup> There are very few Husserl scholars who would argue that Husserl was a *metaphysical* idealist.<sup>28</sup> If one recalls, Berkeley's metaphysical idealism did not deny the existence of material things, but only their mind-independence.<sup>29</sup> He famously said, "to be is to be perceived (or to perceive)." Even at his most idealist-sounding moments, Husserl insisted that to portray his idealism in the manner of a Berkeleyanism would be to misunderstand him entirely.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most prevalent and contemporary way of understanding Husserl's transcendental idealism in distinction from Berkeley's *metaphysical* idealism is to portray it as an *epistemological* idealism.<sup>31</sup> As such, Husserl's idealism would only extend to the mind-dependency of meaning, sense, knowledge, and constituted truths *about* the

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<sup>27</sup> For the purposes of this essay, we will take the relatively uncontroversial claim that Husserl is not a metaphysical idealist as our starting point. As long as one accepts this premise, then it does not matter whether one thinks that Husserl's later transcendental philosophy remains metaphysically neutral like Carr and Crowell argue or if it has realist metaphysical impact as Zahavi argues; in the very least, it is concerned with the constitution of the *meaning* of the real world.

<sup>28</sup> Some prominent examples would be Sartre, Ingaarden, and Herman Philipse. For Sartre's questionable treatment of Husserl see Matthew C. Eshleman, 'Jean-Paul Sartre and Phenomenological Ontology,' in Lester Embree and Thomas Nenon (eds.), *Husserl's Ideen*, New York, Springer, pp. 327–49.

<sup>29</sup> George Berkeley, 'Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous,' in *Berkeley's Philosophical Writings*, New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1965.

<sup>30</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenological Philosophy First Book*, Boston, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983, p. 129, p. 241.

<sup>31</sup> Rudolf Bernet, 'Husserl's Transcendental Idealism Revisited,' *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 1–20; David Carr, *The Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999; Steven Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Paths Toward Transcendental Phenomenology*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2001; Dan Zahavi, 'Husserl's Noema and the Internalism-externalism Debate,' *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 47, no. 1: pp. 42–66.

world. In this respect, to conceive of Husserl's project as an attempt to show the mind-dependence of material things would be to conflate the difference between knowing and the known. Further, this conflation would not understand the true sense of the phenomenological reduction, which is to *bracket* the naive realism of the natural attitude without—and here I cannot stress this enough—to *bracket naive realism without denying it*.<sup>32</sup>

In order to understand why phenomenology is not correlationism in the derogatory sense, one must hold on to this last point and understand the philosophical attitude *as a reflective stance towards the natural attitude*. The natural attitude is Husserl's term for our everyday, unquestioned naive realism or belief in the existence of the world—that it is “obviously there.”<sup>33</sup> For him, despite their critical status, the natural sciences also participate in the natural attitude.<sup>34</sup> Thus, we can already see at this systematic level that, contrary to Meillassoux's statements, Husserl the apparent correlationist and Meillassoux are actually very close in asserting that a naive realism underlies the sense of all scientific statements, theories, and hypotheses. However, Husserl also distinguishes between the natural attitude and philosophy or phenomenology. Philosophy begins when we no longer *participate* in this naive realism of the natural attitude but *bracket* it. The method of bracketing this naive belief, Husserl calls the phenomenological *epoché* or reduction.<sup>35</sup> Once we bracket the naive realism of the natural attitude, we can reflect upon the activities that we carry out within it. Within the reduction, instead of engaging in these everyday activities in a straightforward way, we take a reflective distance from them.

Tom Sparrow (2014) has recently attempted to supplement Meillassoux's critique of correlationism by applying it to the phenomenological tradition more thoroughly.<sup>36</sup> Although I think Sparrow is right to emphasize that

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<sup>32</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 129.

<sup>33</sup> Husserl, 'Kant,' p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Husserl, 'Kant,' p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 60–62.

<sup>36</sup> Tom Sparrow, *End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

phenomenology should be conceived of as a philosophical method, I think his other claims are extremely problematic.<sup>37</sup> Phenomenology is not just a method, but also the name of a tradition that surrounds this method, commenting upon and criticizing it, while also transforming it in the process. So it is blind-sighted to claim, as Sparrow does, that phenomenology “began and ended with Husserl.”<sup>38</sup> It is equally problematic to claim that since Husserl “could never settle on a precise formulation” of his phenomenological method, and that since subsequent phenomenologists did not reach a ‘consensus’ on it, phenomenology never really got off the ground.<sup>39</sup> Husserl’s formulations of his method may have varied over his career. As a case in point, he gave ontological, Kantian, and Cartesian presentations of the reduction. But to say they were not precise formulations is just not accurate. And it is quite curious why one would suppose that there must be a consensus in order to justify philosophical method. If this were the case, would there be any philosophy at all—not to mention the loose group of philosophies known as speculative realism? Philosophy, unlike science, is not the kind of practice that requires consensus. But perhaps Sparrow’s most pointed criticism is his claim that while a transcendental phenomenologist (the person) may hold realist commitments, “those commitments are not the *product* of the phenomenological method or phenomenological description.”<sup>40</sup> This sounds reasonable, at first. Because the reduction brackets the natural attitude and its world belief, it would seem plausible to suggest that phenomenology cannot then establish (through its method or descriptions) a realist position. But upon further consideration, this also proves short-sighted. Contrary to both Meillassoux’s and Sparrow’s criticisms, we can see Husserlian phenomenology *establishing the possibility of metaphysical realism* in the following way.

If one is content to portray Husserl’s overall project as an epistemological idealism, then his project should be understood as a philosophical attempt (in part) to establish, ground, or justify the *sense* of the objective world. There is good

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<sup>37</sup> Sparrow, *End of Phenomenology*, p. ix, p. 1ff.

<sup>38</sup> Sparrow, *End of Phenomenology*, p. ix.

<sup>39</sup> Sparrow, *End of Phenomenology*, p. 185, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Sparrow, *End of Phenomenology*, p. 3.

precedent in the literature for this. Rudolf Bernet writes, “The phenomenological idealism of *Ideas I*...is the outcome of a phenomenological investigation concerning the conditions of the possibility of authentic knowledge of objective reality” and it is an attempt to “justify belief in the existence of the world.”<sup>41</sup> In this sense, Husserl’s project can be understood as an attempt to overcome global skepticism about the reality of the world. (Zahavi 2003b, 14).<sup>42</sup> *Vis-à-vis* skepticism, regardless of whether or not one thinks he succeeds, Husserl’s transcendental idealism must be understood as an attempt to show the possibility of the natural attitude’s naive realism. Yet Husserl recognized that in the demonstration of a proof, one cannot assume what one wants to prove. Thus: the phenomenological reduction, which seeks to purify consciousness from its empirical assumptions, in order to ground and justify those very assumptions.<sup>43</sup> For instance, if—through the reduction—it can be shown that the essence of knowledge is to connect the knower to the known objectivity, then the very sense of knowledge is such that it guarantees a link between an *instance* of actual knowing and objectivity—if indeed it *is* an actual act of knowing.<sup>44</sup> And this link between thought and being is not, as Meillassoux would have it, metaphysically either a reductive or an eliminative idealism. As Husserl is quick to point out, the very sense of objectivity is to be “what it is in itself... [or that] which is and what it is whether it is known or not.”<sup>45</sup> Contrary to the speculative realist critique that phenomenology cannot result in

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<sup>41</sup> Bernet, ‘Husserl’s Transcendental Idealism,’ p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Zahavi, ‘Phenomenology and Metaphysics,’ p. 14. While agreeing with the epistemological idealist thesis up to this point, it is here that Zahavi takes his departure from Carr and Crowell’s position, arguing that this attempt to reject global skepticism requires Husserl’s phenomenology to *not* be metaphysically neutral, but to have *realist* metaphysical impact. I have sought to remain with the metaphysically neutral thesis by limiting myself to claiming that Husserl shows the *possibility* of naive realism, since this seems to be the minimal requirement for showing how Husserlian phenomenology can have realist import. However, as Zahavi points out, this is problematic since this neutrality then might have opened up the possibility for its opposite, skepticism. One would have to make a decision on the debate between Carr, Crowell, and Zahavi in order to overcome this problem. For this paper, I will suspend this decision since all that needs to be shown in response to the speculative realists is that phenomenology *can* yield realist commitments.

<sup>43</sup> Bernet, ‘Husserl’s Transcendental Idealism,’ p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2013, pp. 20–21.

<sup>45</sup> Husserl, *The Idea*, p. 21.

realist commitments, Husserlian phenomenology offers the possibility of transforming the natural attitude's naive realism into a hard-won realism through the phenomenological reduction.

The reduction helps establish the naive realism of the natural attitude. Once bracketed by the reduction, this realist demeanour is not so much excluded from philosophical consideration, so much as suspended. Put differently, the naive realism of everyday life is *included* within the phenomenological reduction, but not *enacted* by the phenomenologist him or herself *during philosophical reflection upon it*.<sup>46</sup> Just like something (e.g., a mathematical formula) that is put in brackets or parentheses, it still remains *there* and given. Husserl says that when one performs the reduction upon, for instance, a given act of perceiving, say a blossoming apple tree, "everything remains as of old."<sup>47</sup> The perception of a tree is still given *as enacted by the pre-reflective or natural subject*. However, the subjective ego splits and the phenomenological subject looks down upon the natural subject in an act of reflection.<sup>48</sup> While the phenomenological subject does not enact the natural positing, it looks down upon their natural subjectivity that does enact this positing. The phenomenological reduction "prevents any judgment about perceived actuality..." but it "does not prevent the judgment about the fact that that perception is consciousness *of* an actuality (the positing of which, however, should not be 'effected')."<sup>49</sup> Within the reduction, the world remains, but within brackets as it were. As such, the physical thing *as meant*, yet meant *as a real spatial thing independent from the subject* also remains. *Phenomenology can thereby be seen as the attempt to establish this real transcendence or mind-independence of the material thing through the very meanings or sense that the phenomenological subject constitutes within the reduction.*

If we keep these thoughts in mind, we can see that Meillassoux's and Sparrow's characterization of phenomenology as correlationism misses the mark. Conceiving of Husserl's phenomenology as an *epistemological* idealism in the manner described above, we will *not* conceive it as an attempt to "disavow" naive

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<sup>46</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, pp. 58–59; Zahavi, 'Husserl's Noema,' p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 216.

<sup>48</sup> Husserl, 'Kant,' p. 35.

<sup>49</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 220.

realism as Meillassoux would have it, but as an attempt to ground naive realism's very possibility.<sup>50</sup> And, furthermore, Sparrow's claim that the phenomenological method cannot yield realist results proves to be off point. Meillassoux and Sparrow have *oversimplified* Husserlian phenomenology in order to label it correlationism. Second, once we take into consideration the way in which phenomenology does not *negate* the naive realism of the natural attitude, but presents it *intact* within the phenomenological reduction, we can see that it is precisely the realist meanings of objectivity, mind-independent existence, real spatial existence, and being 'in itself' that are at stake in phenomenology's battle against skepticism. By portraying phenomenology as akin to Berkeleyian metaphysical idealism, Meillassoux and Sparrow do not seem to understand that the reduction is not an attempt to *ontologically* reduce the being of the world to subjectivity, but to show the ontological difference between the being of consciousness and that of the world; and, furthermore, to show the way that consciousness can achieve a realist demeanour towards this world. The phenomenological reduction does not exclude naive realism but includes it *as a possibility to be established by a philosophically responsible consciousness*.

Here, Meillassoux and his followers might pose the following objection. They may cede that this portrayal of the phenomenological reduction is sound, but that it in fact proves too much. They may say that while phenomenology does in fact seek to ground the naive realism of the natural attitude, it nevertheless can only do so by including the being of the world *within* consciousness *as meant*. In other words, even if the world remains the same after the reduction, the world nevertheless takes on the property of a mere correlate of consciousness, itself only 'occurring' *within* consciousness. In fact, Husserl himself portrays the natural world as a correlate of consciousness, one that may be annihilated before an *enduring* consciousness, and claims that to attempt to reach the outside of consciousness is absurd.<sup>51</sup> Once again, we seem to be faced with a Berkeleyian

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<sup>50</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 105, pp. 109–112; Husserl, *The Idea*, pp. 83–85. For discussions of Husserl's infamous passage on the annihilation of the world that do not read it as a metaphysical idealist proposal, see Dan Zahavi, 'Internalism, Externalism, and Transcendental Idealism,' *Synthese*, no. 160, 2008, pp. 355–374.

metaphysical idealism, since it is only in being correlated with a consciousness that we can at all say that something exists. We can respond to this in two steps.

The first thing to note is that although phenomenology does indeed use the figurative strategy of talking about the intentional relation as a relation that includes the intended within it, in a specific sense this is only metaphorical. With regard to material things, to take the intentional relationship as something that *really includes its correlates within it*, would be a fundamental misunderstanding of Husserl. He writes, “*with an absolutely unconditional universality and necessity it is the case that a physical thing cannot be given in any possible perception, in any possible consciousness, as something really inherently immanent. Thus, there emerges a fundamentally essential difference between being as mental process and being as a physical thing.*”<sup>52</sup> Far from ontologically reducing the being of the physical thing to the being of consciousness, the phenomenological method establishes the absolute necessity of the ontological transcendence of the thing relative to consciousness. We could say that it establishes the possibility of the real independence of the thing from the mind.

Nevertheless, as we have already seen, Meillassoux admits as much, saying the correlationist can affirm the existence of the real.<sup>53</sup> He only denies that the correlationist can conceive of this transcendence when there is no *de facto* consciousness correlated with it. We are again back where we started, with Meillassoux portraying correlationism as equivalent to Berkeleyianism. Phenomenological correlationism, from this perspective, is not necessarily an eliminative idealism, but a reductive idealism. It does not deny the existence of

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Bernet, ‘Husserl’s Transcendental Idealism;’ and Karl Amerik, ‘Husserl’s Realism,’ *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 86, no. 4, 1977, pp. 498–519.

<sup>52</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 89. One can also point to p. 241 where, contrasting his work with Berkeley’s, Husserl distinguishes the being of the noema from the being of the perceived. There is a technical debate surrounding the proper interpretation of the noema that centers around two issues: idealism/realism and externalism/internalism. For an overview of the issue of the interpretation of the noema, see Zahavi, ‘Husserl’s Noema;’ Zahavi, ‘Internalism, Externalism;’ John Drummond, ‘An Abstract Consideration: De-Ontologizing the Noema,’ in John Drummond and Lester Embree (eds.), *The Phenomenology of the Noema*, New York, Springer, 1992, pp. 89–109; Robert Sokolowski, ‘Husserl and Frege,’ *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 84, no. 10, 1987, pp. 521–528.

<sup>53</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 7.

the real world or even the difference between mind and matter, but merely argues that matter (whatever its determination) cannot exist without being correlated with a consciousness. With regard to the ancestral, then, the correlationist cannot posit its reality without also positing a *de facto* consciousness that correlates with it. And so phenomenological correlationism essentially misconstrues the very sense of those ancestral objects that *de facto* do not or cannot have such a correlation (e.g., pre-terrestrial events such as the formation of the solar system).

However, we can show that phenomenology *does* show the possibility of some thing's *de facto* existence without a *de facto* intentionality regarding it. On the one hand, Meillassoux is correct to indicate that phenomenology posits an undeniable correlation between a perceiving subject and an actual real thing. One of the transcendental conditions for a true perception to occur is that there is a *de facto* subject perceiving the *de facto* thing.<sup>54</sup> However, on the other hand, perception is only the most optimal way to relate to a thing.<sup>55</sup> Apart from perception, there are other ways of intending something real with varying degrees of evidence or givenness. Furthermore, for phenomenology, a physical thing is "essentially capable of being perceived."<sup>56</sup> Yet, "the 'field of attentive regard' is not infinite."<sup>57</sup> This is the key point. *Because the correlated perceiver is only correlated in principle, the real temporal and spatial horizon of real things outside of any de facto consciousness may extend beyond the finite limits of that de facto consciousness.* Consequently, phenomenology does not require a *de facto* correlation between a subject and a thing in order to establish the existence of a physical thing. Rather, it only requires the *essential* principle that this thing's existence implies a *possible* perception by a *de facto* consciousness.<sup>58</sup> We are now in a position to see how phenomenology can ground

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<sup>54</sup> Bernet, 'Husserl's Transcendental Idealism,' p. 15. Keep in mind that from within the reduction, where world-belief has been suspended, to speak of *de facto* subjects, objects, or anything is to speak of these actualities in the mode of possibility.

<sup>55</sup> Zahavi, 'Phenomenology and Metaphysics,' p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 99.

<sup>57</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, p. 99. For a similar discussion of the following, see Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1995, pp. 19–21.

<sup>58</sup> For critiques of this Husserlian position from a post-phenomenological standpoint, see Rudolf Bernet, 'Presence and Absence of Meaning: Husserl and Derrida on the Crisis of (the) Present Time,' in Simon



the realist sense of ancestral statements.

#### GROUNDING THE ANCESTRAL THROUGH PHENOMENOLOGY

If we can now show that phenomenology can indeed ground the sense of ancestral statements, then I think we will have sufficiently refuted Meillassoux's characterization of phenomenology as correlationism. To make this argument more concrete, we will be using the example of the ancestral statement "the earth formed 4.56 billion years ago." Please keep this statement in mind in the following considerations.

With regard to this ancestral statement, we must first remember that the phenomenological reduction effects a methodological difference between philosophy and natural science. As such, when we take this statement as our example, we are not taking it in the way either a scientist or a layman (assuming they are naive realists) would take it: namely, as a naively realist theory about the earth's actual formation 4.56 billion years ago. It is not phenomenology's job to posit what is empirically real and/or engage in the verifying or falsifying activities of the sciences.<sup>59</sup> However, as we have seen, nor does this mean that we are denying this naive realist sense (i.e., ontological independence) that belongs with the ancestral statement as a scientific theory. It is this very sense that a phenomenologist would try to show *as possible*. With regard to our example, the phenomenologist would try to show how the realist intent of the theory about the age of the earth is possible by showing the connection between the intention and the objectivity it intends. Furthermore, we should recall that in showing this possibility, phenomenology is thereby not reducing the being of external things to the being of immanent consciousness. Rather, in taking the ancestral as a

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Silverman (ed.) *Phenomenology of Temporality: Time and Language*, Pittsburgh, Simon Silverman Phenomenology Centre, 1987, pp. 33–64; and, more recently, John Sallis, 'The Cosmological Turn,' *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 152–162.

<sup>59</sup> The relationship between phenomenology and the positive sciences is a larger issue that has been taken up under the heading, naturalizing phenomenology. For a review and discussion of the issues involved see Zahavi, 'Naturalized Phenomenology;' Zahavi, 'A Desideratum' and Havi Carel and Darian Meacham, 'Phenomenology and Naturalism: Editors' Introduction,' *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, no. 72, 2016, pp. 1–21.

physical thing or event, phenomenology establishes the difference between it and that which occurs *within* consciousness itself. Thus, phenomenology would seek to show the ontological difference between the scientific subject that posits the occurrence of the formation of the earth and the formation of the earth itself.

Still, as we have also seen, this is not enough for Meillassoux to be satisfied, since he is concerned with establishing the ancestral as something that we can say existed without a necessary relation to a *de facto* subjective consciousness. Mirroring our comments above, we are already in a position to show that phenomenology grounds the realist sense of the ancestral statement because it finds the possibility of some thing's *de facto* existence without a *de facto* intentionality with regard to it.

The phenomenology of science establishes the possibility of the experiment on the arche-fossil (Meillassoux's term for the materials scientists use to make discoveries about the ancestral) insofar as this experiment requires a perceiving subject. As was noted above, phenomenology *does* necessarily require a *de facto* subjectivity in order for the perception of a real actual object to occur. As such, whatever perceptual processes are involved in the scientist's radiometric dating of isotopes in ancient rocks and meteorites requires a *de facto* scientist.<sup>60</sup> However, as is clear from the very example of dating rocks to determine the age of the earth, not all intended objects are given in their optimal bodily presence. In fact, not all objects are given directly in the flesh at all, such as the past formation of the earth, which is an event that no longer exists or is no longer occurring. Besides bodily presence, there are also lower degrees of evidence. One such case is mediate evidence.<sup>61</sup> In mediate evidence something that cannot be given in the flesh, for

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<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, it requires a *de facto* intersubjective community. See Bernet, 'Husserl's Transcendental Idealism.' Ennis, in his defense of Meillassoux, is wrong to suggest that Husserl's conception of transcendental intersubjectivity amounts to an instance of correlationism. Ennis, like Meillassoux, confuses the *way* in which objective reality is constituted (or recognized) intersubjectively *with that objective reality itself*. Paul Ennis, 'The Transcendental Core of Correlationism,' *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2011, 37–48.

<sup>61</sup> Charles W. Harvey and Jim D Shelton, 'Husserl's Phenomenology and the Ontology of the Natural Sciences,' in Lee Hardy and Lester Embree (eds.), *Phenomenology of Natural Science*, New York, Springer, 1978, p. 125.

whatever reason, can still testify to its ‘existence’ through its effects upon another. Such testifying occurs *via* a synthesis of intuitive givenness of something present (*e.g.*, an arche-fossil) and knowledge about the world, including inferences about causality, etc. In our case, the formation of the earth cannot be present to the scientist because this event *by definition* is a past event that no longer exists. However, because of the scientist’s knowledge about causality, the constant rate of decay of isotopes, geological formations, and cosmological theories about the solar system, the scientist can use this knowledge along with mediate evidence to infer the occurrence and date of this event.

Nevertheless, phenomenology does not necessarily posit a *de facto* subject with regard to the ancestral event. While it is the case that phenomenology requires such a *de facto* subject for scientific investigation about the ancestral, it does not require such a *de facto* subject with regard to the being of the ancestral itself. Phenomenology shows how knowledge about ancestral events and their temporal priority are possible through its analysis of the constitution of objective time.<sup>62</sup> Suffice it to say that these analyses establish the possibility of a *de facto* subject recognizing the anteriority (in Meillassoux’s sense) of the ancestral, because they establish the essential necessity of order and sequentiality in objective time. Thus, it is no problem for empirical subjects (human beings) within this objective time to intend a real time before their own emergence (the formation of the earth). Phenomenology shows this very possibility. And because the temporal and spatial horizon that lies beyond human consciousness is much broader than the finitude of human consciousness itself, it is completely sensible for human beings to posit and intend objects that lie outside of their own temporal limits—including the anteriority of the formation of the earth.

Phenomenology establishes the objectivity of such ancestral events as being ontologically irreducible to *de facto* human consciousness. It does so precisely by recognizing that physical objects themselves only essentially require *perceiving*

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<sup>62</sup> Dieter Lohmar, ‘On the Constitution of the Time of the World: The Emergence of Objective Time on the Ground of Subjective Time,’ in Dieter Lohmar and Ichiro Yamaguchi (eds.), *On Time: New Contributions to the Husserlian Phenomenology of Time*, New York, Springer, 2010.

*subjects in principle—in other words, potential de facto* perception. This establishes a sufficient difference between the actual event of the ancestral itself, which *may have* or *may not have* been perceived by any *de facto* subjects human or otherwise, and the *de facto* intentions of human subjects today that intend this event in the past. From a phenomenological perspective, it is possible to posit the objective occurrence of the formation of the earth 4.56 billion years ago as an event that was possibly *not* perceived by any subjectivity, thus preserving its potential non-givenness to any *de facto* consciousness. Thus, a phenomenologist can not only affirm the existence of the ancestral, he/she can also affirm its mind-independence. Its existence as a physical thing does not depend upon any *de facto* correlation with a perceiving subject. Such a correlation only comes about if and when a *de facto* subject comes to know about the universe prior to its emergence. In relation to the ancestral, knowledge in a phenomenological sense and the epistemic correlation used to build it retains the mind-independence of that which is intended.

#### CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN ECSTATIC NATURALISM

Perhaps the most substantial opportunity that the speculative realist critique presents to phenomenologists is to challenge them to continue to transform their ideas of nature and the transcendental. Husserl's epistemic idealism shows how the transcendental subject is not simply one object amongst others in the natural world. It has constitutive power for the meaning of phenomena. And yet, his system preserves a place for the real antecedence of natural phenomena by qualifying its givenness to constituting consciousness as *a possible givenness* to a *de facto* subject. This makes room for an evolutionary perspective where human beings are a contingent feature of the real universe. Yet, this is not to say that phenomenology then simply dovetails with a traditional naturalist perspective. The enduring mistake of scientific naturalism, in this case, would be to cast consciousness within a cause-and-effect nexus by tracing a line of material evolution from the ancestral to now. How then can transcendental consciousness understand itself as a real part of the material universe without adopting an unmodified scientific perspective; that is, without turning itself into one caused

object amongst others in a causal field?

To address this problem, contemporary transcendental phenomenologists need to be able to show *the unity* between nature (or the universe) and constituting subjectivity, where this unity is not a nexus of causal determination—which would reduce the subject to an object. In other words, it requires a re-thinking of nature such that it shows the possibility of the constituting activity of subjective life *and* the possibility of the natural sciences with their causal frameworks. Scientific practice would be an objectification of this more primordial realm of nature, one which redescribed it from within this projected causal matrix. In other words, this more original view of nature would nest within itself the technical practice of science (by scientists) and their production of nomological-deductive and statistical-probabilistic models. But this new view could also show how this is only *one* way of describing the same field and how scientific practice is circumscribed by historical life. Taking a different, non-scientific vantage point on the same transcendental plane would yield the possibility of constituting subjectivity, showing how its activities are a non-reducible extension of a real, material field. This transcendental materialism would not be a new version of reductive naturalism. For it would preserve the irreducible nature of consciousness as the novel emergence of a being within the material universe that is open to possibilities that transcend this very same universe. The goal would be to show how the constituting subject, stemming from and surpassing its material limits, can be both physical and metaphysical in orientation.

If the contemporary phenomenologist looks outside the tradition of phenomenology, then they will discover a wealth of inspiration in contemporary thought already dedicated to rethinking science, nature, naturalistic materialism, and the nonhuman world. Science and technology studies have made advances over the traditional subject-object dichotomy, where this amounts to an overly simplistic active-passive binary.<sup>63</sup> Finding precedent in the later Heidegger's view of *das Ding*, but also seeking to re-valorize science and technology from the atmosphere of Heideggerian thought, this approach seeks to show the activity of

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<sup>63</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012.

nonhuman objects in scientific experiments and technical achievement. New materialisms extend these thoughts beyond technoscience and seek to understand how nonhuman things and matter materially constitute cultural and historical contexts.<sup>64</sup> Generally speaking, this body of work presents a view of nature that exceeds the bounds of scientific naturalism. As opposed to substance ontology, where things are identified by way of their essence this perspective presents things as materially relational. Something's identity is constituted just as much by its material context and the way it affects this material context as it is by its individuality.

Other than the fact these approaches do not use a phenomenological method, for phenomenologists perhaps the largest shortcoming of this body of work is that it tends to be less aware of transcendental issues. These theorists tend to be less inclined to discussing transcendental concerns about the relation between materiality and consciousness. In general, this tends to manifest itself when these thinkers take for granted a causal-explanatory framework as their own. Scientific explanation (either natural or historical) is the reigning paradigm in these bodies of work as they seek to offer explanatory theories for their topic. The issues that accompany such a causal model when linked with a transcendental project are often not addressed.

An ecstatic cosmology and materialism would seek to show the transcendental unity of the more-than-human cosmos and constituting consciousness. Those coming from a phenomenological perspective will immediately recognize the tension in the application of the term ecstatic to non-*Dasein*-like entities. Ecstatic materialism would not amount to an existential panpsychism—so to speak, mapping *Dasein*'s purposive, meaning-receptive structure onto the nonhuman world. Instead, along with contemporary posthumanist theory, it would seek to show how nonhuman materiality is not simply static but opened-up to material possibilities that it non-intentionally selects. And such a

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<sup>64</sup>Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010; Christopher N. Gamble, Joshua S. Hanan, and Thomas Nail, 'What is New Materialism,' *Angelaki*, vol. 24, no. 6, 2019, pp. 111–34.

set of selections eventually comes to set material conditions upon the embodied, historical subject who will be designated as also transcendental. The real actively exists over and through time, providing materially constrained but also enabling limitations for novel entities like *Dasein* to emerge. If and when, such meaning-disclosing entities do emerge, some of the possibilities within which they exist are indeed material, limited by natural law and physical context. But the possibilities within which human beings exist also extend beyond the physical universe—in cases where such beings grasp ideal objects, conjecture about possible worlds, or discuss metaphysics. The goal of an ecstatic cosmology would be to show a transcendental unity between the material possibilities of the real and the emergence of a constituting consciousness that can grasp these *as its own possibilities* while also transcending beyond them into more abstract, metaphysical lines of thought beyond the given universe.

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