



Phenomenology Without Correlationism: Husserl's Hyletic Material

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Abstract

The thrust of the argument presented in this paper is that phenomenological ontology survives the criticism of "correlationism" as advanced by speculative realism, a movement that has evolved in continental philosophy over the past decade. Correlationism is the position, allegedly occupied by phenomenology, that presupposes the ontological primacy of the human subject. Phenomenology survives this criticism not because the criticism misses its mark, but because phenomenology occupies a position that is broader than that of correlationism. With its critique of correlationism, speculative realism rightly identifies a battle that no longer needs to be fought: the battle against 19th century brands of mechanical realism. Free from the impatient and defensive posturing against the mechanization of the human, phenomenology is also free to explore the world beyond its emphasis on human experience. Doing so requires a return to Husserl's discussion of hylé and the "twofold bed" of phenomenology. Phenomenology may emphasize hylé – that is, material; or it may emphasize nous – the world as it appears to or is transformed by consciousness. By returning to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception, a case is made for hyletic phenomenology. Hyletic phenomenology allows for ontological reversibility and recognizes the "unhuman" elements in things. It is hyletic phenomenology that grounds phenomenological ontology after the critique of correlationism has been assessed.

Introduction

This paper sets out to establish three aims. The first is to summarise the implications of the criticism that phenomenology is correlationist – a criticism issuing from the recently developed continental school of speculative realism. Correlationism is the argument that subject and object collapse into a human-subject-correlate. This criticism is troubling, because it suggests that phenomenology has little to offer the continually evolving critical and socio-cultural studies and humanities. In focus at present is phenomenological ontology, and specifically the inter/relationship between subject and object. The second aim is to demonstrate that the critique of

correlationism is not new to phenomenology. Indeed, the ontological limitations implied by correlationism have been considered by Husserl (1913/2002), Heidegger (1936-38/2012), and Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962, 1964/1968), and most impressively so in Merleau-Ponty's lecture notes on *Nature* (1956-60/2003). Finally, I outline a phenomenological ontology that takes into consideration the criticism levelled by speculative realism. However, rather than arguing that phenomenological ontology must undergo a radical transformation in order to satisfy the recent demands of continental philosophy, I maintain that all that is required is a broadening of emphasis. This is to say that speculative realism has rightly identified that the continued emphasis on the human subject – an

emphasis that was particularly important in response to the psychologism of the early 20th century – is no longer necessary. Husserl (1913/2002) has outlined a twofold task for phenomenology – *hyletic* and *noetic* phenomenology (pp. 174-178). Finally, Merleau-Ponty will play a pivotal role in negotiating the tension between phenomenology and speculative realism. This is because he is both the target of the criticisms familiar to speculative realism such as anthropocentrism and dualism (Barbaras, 1991/2004; Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968) as well as an example of their solution (Harman, 2005).

Phenomenological Ontology after 19th Century Realism

Phenomenology developed at a time when it had become customary to reduce the world to its smallest parts – parts that operate by the predictable rules of mechanical physics. This was most apparent in the humanistic sciences of medical biology (e.g., Goldstein, 1934/1995) and psychology (e.g., Köhler, 1929/1947). Both of these received attention from Husserl (1913/2002, 1936/1970) and Merleau-Ponty (1942/1963, 1945/1962). Evidence gathered both inside and outside the laboratory has demonstrated repeatedly that a mechanistic ontology is insufficient for understanding the operations, behaviour and experience of humans. But this critique was never limited to the humanistic sciences. The untenability of 19th century mechanical realism has been demonstrated in physics, chemistry, biology, botany, and other fields (see Cobb & Griffin, 1977, for an impressive summary of many of these). To say that phenomenology had developed only in response to mechanical realism is to suggest that phenomenology has nothing to offer beyond its criticism of, and its proposed alternative to, the 19th century brand of realism. This is important to understand in the context of speculative realism, because its critique begins with the observation that science and philosophy are no longer compelled by 19th century realism, and thus no longer need to be defended against it. For example, Harman (2002/2006) explains that “[b]y nervously avoiding all mention of specific entities, [phenomenology] continues to lose sleep over an enemy that has not existed for seventy years” (p. 28). To be sure, phenomenological ontology has indeed emphasized its anti-realist position, but I argue that this does not necessarily typify phenomenological ontology. Indeed, speculative realism has done well to demonstrate that the issues originally faced by phenomenology, although important seven decades ago, are no longer a threat. While there is certainly work left unfinished in the fields of psychology and medicine, the dogma of 19th century realism is hardly the bogeyman it once was. Phenomenology may now de-emphasize its position against the dehumanizing mechanization of the human; this leaves it available

to emphasize additional nuances of its ontology – like the mutual role played by subject and object in the phenomenologicalization of contemporary physics (Rosen, 2008).

In order to understand how phenomenological ontology might shift its emphasis in response to speculative realism, the implications of the latter’s critique that phenomenology is correlationist must first be clarified. Since correlationists maintain that phenomena may only be understood through the correlate of human consciousness, a few examples from phenomenology have been selected that demonstrate this. As mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty has been useful in understanding this criticism and in finding examples, because he has struggled against the emphasis on human consciousness in his own work. Merleau-Ponty’s own apparent dissatisfaction with *Phenomenology of Perception* despite, I argue that this seminal work is every bit as exciting as *The Visible and the Invisible*. Indeed, I will use the former to fashion a phenomenological ontology that aptly follows the speculative realist critique of correlationism. But first, the criticism that phenomenology is correlationist needs to be addressed.

Phenomenology and the Dogma of Correlationism

Husserl, along with the phenomenological tradition that would follow, makes great strides in developing and defending a metaphysics that negotiates the rift of incommensurability between pure idealism and pure realism. The proposal is for a rigorous method that does not begin with the presupposition of the positive universe (or the *natural attitude*), and that simultaneously avoids falling into speculative metaphysics. Harman (2011) explains how this position, occupied by phenomenology, is necessarily correlationist:

Authors working in the continental tradition have generally claimed to stand beyond the traditional dispute between realism (“reality exists outside our mind”) and idealism (“reality exists only in the mind”). The correlationist alternative, so dominant that it is often left unstated by its adherents, is to assume that we can think neither of human without world nor of world without human, but only of a primordial correlation or rapport between the two. (p. 2)

Following Brentano’s (1874/2002) resurrection of the mediaeval notion of intentionality, Husserl defends a consciousness that comprises intending subject and intentional object as constituents in the intentional event. To be sure, the duality of subject and object collapse into a singularity, but the problematic assumption is that this emergent singularity is limited to, and located within, the human. The world and the

subject are fused such that, as Harman has stated, “we can think neither of human without world nor of world without human”. The term “correlation” was introduced by Quentin Meillassoux (2003/2012), who explains its inference as follows:

By “correlation” we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. ... Consequently, it becomes possible to say that every philosophy which disavows naïve realism has become a variant of correlationism. (p. 5)

Husserl’s defence of a transcendental phenomenological methodology begins with such a rejection of naïve realism. This is evident in the *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936/1970), and it has also been used as a measure of one’s commitment to the project of phenomenology. Indeed, Dillon (1988/1998, pp. 69-77) has even criticized Husserl for his failure to reject naïve realism completely in his analysis of the consequences that follow from the rejection of the constancy hypothesis. Correlationism rejects the ontological privileging of objectivity that naïve realism suggests. But it does so, purportedly, without reversing the ontological privilege. Meillassoux continues:

Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object “in itself”, in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object. (p. 5)

Harman (2011) explains the correlationist position further:

Whereas realists assert the existence of a world independent of human thought and idealists deny such an autonomous world, correlationism adopts an apparently sophisticated intermediate position, in which human and world come only as a pair and cannot be addressed outside their mutual correlation. Accordingly, the dispute between realism and idealism is dismissed as a “pseudo-problem”. Inspired ultimately by Immanuel Kant, correlationists are devoted to the human-world correlate as the sole topic of philosophy, and this has become the unspoken central dogma of all continental and much analytic philosophy. (p. vii)

Given the apparent integration of the two categories – subject and object, mind and body, ideal and real – the position of correlationism is often taken as a positionless position. The benefits of each position of the categorical dualities listed above are preserved by binding them together into a unified whole. Moreover, this solution seems to have typified much of continental thought. Whether the glue that binds the dualisms be consciousness (as per continental philosophy) or language (as per analytic philosophy), the result is the same: an indivisible human link between the real and the ideal. Harman explains the genesis of the term and its subsequent reception:

The rapid adoption of this word, to the point that an intellectual movement has already assembled to combat the menace it describes, suggests that “correlationism” describes a pre-existent reality that was badly in need of a name. Whenever disputes arise in philosophy concerning realism and idealism, we immediately see the appearance of a third personage who dismisses both of these alternatives as solutions to a pseudo-problem. This third figure is the correlationist, who holds that we can never think of the world without humans nor of humans without the world, but only of a primal correlation or rapport between the two. (2011, pp. 7-8)

In his introduction of the term, Meillassoux (2003/2012) identifies the continuing trend in contemporary philosophical circles – namely those continental strands that begin with consciousness – to grant absolute ontological primacy to intentional (human) consciousness. While the human certainly provides a nexus through which these dualities might collide, the correlationists have ended their investigation with the human as the only possible nexus. This has resulted in dogmatic humanism.

The problem with the continued emphasis on the human-correlate of knowledge is that it is incapable of understanding and investigating the non-human boundaries of experience. The rapid proliferation of posthuman studies (e.g. Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2012) demonstrates a desire to move past the anthropocentric discourses that were so important to the middle of the century past. Mechanomorphism is no longer the threat, but perhaps anthropocentrism is. If understood as an exclusively correlationist position, phenomenology has little to offer the continuously evolving social and cultural studies. I maintain that phenomenological ontology may continue to inform philosophy beyond correlationism. This will be demonstrated by returning to Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/1962) description of the relationship between subject and object. More specifically, it will be in consideration of subjects and objects as entities that are

antecedent to the event of (human) experience – namely, pre-subjective and pre-objective (referred to presently as *hylé*).

My reason for choosing the *Phenomenology of Perception* to accomplish this task is twofold. Firstly, and most importantly, Merleau-Ponty carefully describes a phenomenological ontology that is not exclusively correlationist (although the latter is still a component). Secondly, Merleau-Ponty later accuses this text of over-emphasizing consciousness as the starting point of phenomenology (1964/1968; 1956-60/2003). By choosing the text that Merleau-Ponty later concludes is correlationist, the present analysis avoids the conclusion that phenomenological ontology after speculative realism requires a fundamental transformation (into, for example, an ontology of flesh). In this way, the present paper may maintain the argument that phenomenology is not integrally correlationist, but that the latter was a useful component for the practice of phenomenology in the century past.

At this juncture, I will briefly address Merleau-Ponty's concerns that his *Phenomenology of Perception* is correlationist. This will assist in more specifically describing the problem of correlationism as it emerges in phenomenology. This will be followed by an argument in favour of a phenomenological ontology, supplied by *Phenomenology of Perception*, that does not require a correlationist bent.

Merleau-Ponty's Criticism of *Phenomenology of Perception*: Dualism and Anthropocentrism

While Dillon (1988/1998) has found Merleau-Ponty's ontological project to succeed in navigating the traps of objectivism and subjectivism, it has only done so at the cost of correlationism. Take, for instance, Jean Beaufret's response (quoted in Merleau-Ponty, 1947/1964) after Merleau-Ponty's presentation of "The Primacy of Perception" to the Société Française de Philosophie in 1946 (Barbaras, 1991/2004):

Nothing appears to me less pernicious than the *Phenomenology of Perception*. The only reproach I would make to the author is not that he has gone "too far", but rather that he has not been sufficiently radical. The phenomenological descriptions which he uses in fact maintain the vocabulary of idealism. In this they are in accord with Husserlian descriptions. But the whole problem is precisely to know whether phenomenology, fully developed, does not require the abandonment of subjectivity and the vocabulary of subjective idealism as, beginning with Husserl, Heidegger has done. (pp. 41-42)

Beaufret finds in *Phenomenology of Perception* what Merleau-Ponty (1956-60/2003) later calls "the humanist conception of Nature". Indeed, this is what Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) himself has observed in reflection upon his own work. With regard to *Phenomenology of Perception*, he writes:

The problems posed in [*Phenomenology of Perception*] are insoluble because I start there from the "consciousness"- "object" distinction – –

Starting from this distinction, one will never understand that a given fact of the "objective" order (a given cerebral lesion) could entail a given disturbance of the relation with the world ... which seems to prove that the whole "consciousness" is a function of the objective body – – it is these very problems that must be disqualified by asking: *what* is the alleged *objective* conditioning? Answer: it is a way of expressing and noting an event of the order of brute or wild being which, ontologically, is primary. (p. 200)

Motivated by Merleau-Ponty's despairing notes, Barbaras (1991/2004) explains how *Phenomenology of Perception* remains trapped within a Cartesian framework. The only solution, therefore, to Cartesian dualism is a correlationist position. Barbaras is careful to observe the critique by which Merleau-Ponty has regarded his own work: beginning with consciousness as the starting point. In doing so, a gap of temporal duration and ontological ether separates things and their being. From this starting point, either subjectivity or objectivity must be given ontological privilege. Merleau-Ponty, Barbaras writes,

still remains prisoner of a philosophy of consciousness inherited from Husserl. This appears clearly in the final analysis of the body in terms of sensing and sensed, touching and touched, subject of the world and part of the world. Such conceptual pairs are just so many displaced modalities of the duality of consciousness and object. The chiasm, then, appears as a means of filling the gap [*écart*] between these dual categories, of recombining what was split apart beforehand, rather than as a truly innovative concept. Thus, I am inclined more and more to think of Merleau-Ponty's final philosophy as not having fully cast off the presuppositions of the philosophy of consciousness and as faltering because of a lack, rather than an excess, of radicality. (p. xxiv)

Barbaras (1991/2004) identifies the ways in which *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Structure of*

Behaviour remain within a dual structure. Rather than escape the subject-object dialectic, Merleau-Ponty remains within it. Moreover, ontological privilege is always given to the subject. Barbaras continues:

Expressed as early as the introduction to *The Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty's purpose lies in understanding the relation between consciousness and nature. The situation of psychology, which attempts to conceive this relation, is characterized by the juxtaposition of a critical philosophy that turns all of nature into an objective unity constituted before consciousness and a science that places consciousness in nature and conceives the relation between them in terms of causality. (p. 3)

As Merleau-Ponty has shown (1956-60/2003), the humanistic and romantic conceptions of Nature succeed in unifying subject-and-object. The problem, however, is that the object may only be understood through the primacy of the perceiving subject. This is the position of correlationism. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, these conceptions receive a body. Thus, objects are understood to collapse into the embodied subject. The subject-object dialectic becomes a knot drawn as tightly as possible – where the two never succeed in becoming intertwined as flesh because the subject is understood to be most primary. Barbaras (1991/2004) explains the dualism evident in the conception of embodied subjectivity:

The body ... appears as something divided by means of the subject-object opposition; it appears as the still mysterious place where the subject-object relation is tied together. This is why finally the body can be described only across the symmetrical exclusion of the two terms of the opposition. The body is neither the subject nor the object, but the mediation of the subject and object. ... Merleau-Ponty oscillates therefore between a unitary conception of the body and a dualistic vision which turns the body into the "means" of consciousness. ... in other words, he never reaches the point of describing *positively* the fact that the body belongs neither to the domain of the object nor to that of the subject. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty's analysis assumes here the Cartesian ambiguity to which he never stops returning. (pp. 7-8)

Barbaras observes that Merleau-Ponty continually stretches this ontological presupposition into spaces of radical nonduality, and yet always returns to the problematic subject-object relationship. What renders it problematic is that it understands that the subject is always ontologically prior to the object.

It is my argument that *Phenomenology of Perception* provides an ontological framework that is capable of avoiding a correlationist stance. For, rather than understand that objects are always constituted by intentional consciousness, one finds in Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) ontology that non-specific event-entities coalesce into a co-constitutive subject-object-relation. It is only by virtue of their mutual relationship that subjects and objects become differentiated as such. Thus, to grant ontological primacy to subject or object ignores the *pre-objective* and *pre-subjective* (terms that only receive their designation retrospectively) entities that were the necessary conditions for the subsequent event. Husserl (1913/2002) outlines the two-fold task thus faced by phenomenology when he writes that "*The stream of phenomenological being has a twofold bed: a material and a noetic*" (p. 178). Phenomenological ontology after speculative realism investigates both.

Hyletic and Noetic Phenomenologies

In a correlationist phenomenological ontology, an object may be understood only as it is in-itself-for-me. The subject, then, is that for whom the world of objects lies in wait. As we have seen, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) later expresses his disappointment with this distinction. But it is important to recognize the context in which his position has been established. The first section of *Phenomenology of Perception* is committed to moving past the ontic object – that is, the positivist object of science. By distinguishing the scientific object from the pre-objective object of experience, Merleau-Ponty must demonstrate the ontological untenability of 19th century realism. He does not, however, end with this distinction. Merleau-Ponty spends more time considering the role played by entities before they have been captured by subjectivities. In doing so, he begins to describe a phenomenological programme for considering non-human/posthuman subjectivities and objectivities, a position found better developed in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Instead of arguing that Merleau-Ponty's ontology begins with the primacy of perception, I maintain that this is merely a starting point of a possible many. The unity of subject and object in human perception signifies the actuality of an event of human experience, but it must be understood that the constituents precede the event's actualization. Before becoming differentiated as subject and object in the event of experience, the as yet undistinguished entities may be understood as Husserl's *hylé*.¹ As *hylé*, it is recognized that a particular entity has the capacity for becoming either an object or a subject –

¹ While Whitehead (2014), following Rosen (2008), has referred to this ontologically undifferentiated matter as a sub-object, for the purposes of historical consistency Husserl's *hylé* has been used in the present paper.

“they might also be entitled *formless materials* or *material forms*” (1913/2002, p. 175). *Hylé* refers to the status of an as yet undistinguished ontological entity: it is ontologically neutral, haunting the events of the world as a possible subject or object. An explication of Husserl’s *hylé*, in the context of the criticism of correlationism, will be the task of this final section. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) will be drawn on for examples.

Hylé

In *Ideas*, Husserl takes a brief detour to explore the ontological boundaries of phenomenology. Here he discerns “primary” or “*sensory*” contents from “the experience or phases of experience, which are the bearers of the specific quality of intentionality” (p. 174). These are the fundamental elements of phenomenological ontology: sensory contents and intentionality. This short list might certainly raise the eyebrows of speculative realists, as each item on the list seems to suggest the necessity of the human-correlate. But this is specifically the problem that Husserl wishes to address in this passage (pp. 174–178). To do so, he clarifies the ambiguity in the category of “sensory contents”.

Husserl explains that the adjective “sensory” immediately suggests two meanings, and that this ambiguity may prove ontologically problematic. Sensory could refer to that which is mediated *through* the “senses” in normal outer perception. This is the object *before it is intended*: a necessary but not sufficient condition for intentionality. Sensory might also indicate the necessity of a subject who is sense-bestowing. This limits the object to its availability to an intentional subject. “Thus, [in] all events,” Husserl explains, “we need a new term which shall express the whole group through its unity of function and its contrast with the formative characters, and we choose for this purpose the expression *hyletic* or *material data*, also plainly and simply *materials*” (p. 176).

Before moving on, it is important to discern *hyletic data* from psychical objects. This is due to the fact that Merleau-Ponty (1942/1962, 1945/1962) is very outspoken against the latter. Psychical, Husserl (1913/2002) explains, is too easily confused with “the distinctive object of psychology” and must therefore be guarded against (p. 177). When introspective psychologists such as Titchener identified objects of perception, they had in mind an empirical reality given in fact. Subjectivity, then, was understood as the pure-impression of objective reality. This is a position that is ontologically untenable. Such access to “[t]he pure impression is”, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) explains, “not only undiscoverable but also imperceptible” (p. 4). The world of perception – of psychical objects – does not precede perception or

cause perception. But this is not the same as Husserl’s *hyletic data*. In order for *hylé* to become psychical objects (or objects of perception), they must undergo the transformation of intentionality. Thus it would be inaccurate and misleading to speak of them as particular psychical objects lying in wait for human consciousness. As *hyletic datum*, material provides a setting for an intentional event or otherwise.

Hylé includes the sensibility of matter without being limited to its availability to human consciousness. This avoids the correlationist suggestion that objects are necessarily waiting around to be intended by humans. Based on the twofold character of sensibility just outlined, phenomenology may be understood as a twofold project: “*The stream of phenomenological being has a twofold bed: a material and a noetic*” (Husserl, 1913/2002, p. 178). Husserl continues – “Phenomenological reflexions and analyses which specially concern the material may be called *hyletically phenomenological*, as, on the other side, those that relate to noetic phases may be referred to as *noetically phenomenological*” (p. 178). Accordingly, phenomenologists may explore the noetic world, beginning with its presentation to and transformation by consciousness. Phenomenology may also begin with matter – “*which contains in itself nothing intentional*” (p. 175); it may begin with the object. There is nothing in phenomenological ontology that prevents the consideration of the object. Husserl does, however, share which of the two tasks he finds the most rewarding: “the incomparably more important and fruitful analyses belong to the noetical side” (p. 178). Indeed, this is where he spends the bulk of his career. In what follows, I will outline a programme of *hyletic phenomenology* with the help of Merleau-Ponty.

Michel Henry (1990/2008) analyzed Husserl’s brief mention of *hyletic phenomenology* in an essay of the same name; here he shares his frustration at what precious little attention (four pages) *hyletic material* has received from Husserl. *Hylé*, Henry argues, provides a point of departure into radically immanent phenomenology – one that avoids the presupposed reduction to the transcendental (in a manner consistent with Spinoza). As such, Merleau-Ponty’s “paradox of immanence and transcendence” would be no paradox at all. This differs from the present analysis, where Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the uncanny will be consulted in the consideration of *hyletic phenomenology*.

Merleau-Ponty’s Event

Concerning the aims of this paper, it is important to emphasize the significance of the criticism of correlationism that speculative realism has issued with regard to phenomenological ontology. This has been taken seriously. The continued emphasis on

objects *qua* intentional-objects, to the neglect of objects as entities antecedent to experience, is no longer necessary. Continuing to insist upon the “onfold bed” of *noetic phenomenology* is to defend against a long-benign threat. By relaxing its defensive posturing against naïve realism, additional benefits of phenomenological ontology may rise to the fore. That is to say that phenomenology may embrace its twofold task of *hylé* and *nous*.

While Merleau-Ponty’s ontology could demonstrate *noetic phenomenology* (see Dillon, 1988/1998), it may also be found to demonstrate the being of the phenomenon (see Barbaras, 1991/2004) or *hyletic phenomenology*. These do not have to be pitted one against the other. Instead, it may be understood that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is sufficiently broad in escaping the objectification of humans as well as the anthropomorphism of things. This is to say that *Phenomenology of Perception* provides an application of phenomenological ontology in the domain of human experience – but it could have focused elsewhere had the social and historical context demanded that it do so. This is no more outlandish than Harman’s (2002/2006) argument that Part II of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* could have been used to investigate something other than human existence, for instance airport tarmac. Here, too, we find it difficult to come up with a focus of investigation more salient at its time than questions of existence and meaning as they were being lived by World War I weary Europeans. The argument is that, for *Phenomenology of Perception* as well as for *Being and Time*, the specific application of the method is not ontologically binding. So what does Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) tell us about the being of entities before they become differentiated as subjects and objects?

In his phenomenological ontology, Merleau-Ponty maintains the reciprocal and mutual becoming of subjects and objects in what he terms the *event*:

When an event is considered at close quarters, at the moment when it is lived through, everything seems subject to chance: one man’s ambition, some lucky encounter, some local circumstance or other appears to have been decisive. But chance happenings offset each other, and facts in their multiplicity coalesce and show up a certain way of taking a stand in relation to the human situation, reveal in fact an *event* which has its definite outcome and about which we can talk. (pp. xviii-xix)

Merleau-Ponty describes the unfolding of an event by using the example of human experience. Once again, this is not an ontological claim. There is no argument that the event of human experience is the only type of

event that can unfold; it is merely an example, useful for understanding what is meant by *event*. Notice how the *event* marks the conclusion of a particular and circumscribed relationship between entities – a subject and an object. As soon as an event has reached this point, we find an object standing in a particular relationship to a subject. This would be a reasonable starting point for *noetic phenomenology*, because it is only at this point that an event-constituent may be differentiated as a human subject. But this is not the beginning of the event. If this relationship between subject and object formed the foundation of phenomenological ontology, then there would be a line dividing nature into the categories of subject and object, each with a particular role or standing in relation to the other. Merleau-Ponty’s dissatisfaction with this position is particularly apparent in *The Visible and the Invisible* and his course notes on *Nature*, but it may be seen even in *Phenomenology of Perception*. It is only through their coalescence in the event that subject-ness and object-ness may become differentiated as such. This leaves a second mode of phenomenological investigation: Husserl’s *hyletic phenomenology*. Merleau-Ponty’s event provides two examples of this. In the first, we will see how an entity may be granted subject-status only by an object – that is, an object constituting a subject, and not necessarily the other way around. This is in line with Husserl’s reference to the “stratum through whose agency ... intentional experience takes form and shape” (1913/2002, p. 175). In the second, we will see how an entity that remains on the periphery of conscious (human) attention may be understood to exist without having been kidnapped by intentionality – Husserl’s “*formless materials* and *immaterial forms*” (p. 175). These will be explored in sequence and with the continued help of Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962).

Observing the role of the object in constituting the subject

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, we learn that the understanding of subjects and objects need not be limited to the significance that the latter holds for the former. Indeed, the very opposite could also be the case. However, given the long-standing bias toward biological reductionism against which Merleau-Ponty had been struggling, it is easy to equate any emphasis on an object with behaviourism or biological reductionism. If the speculative realists are correct, and I think that they are, then phenomenologists may now acknowledge that particular environmental contexts (i.e., objects; see Appelbaum, 1993) or social milieux (i.e., subjects; see Levinas, 1961/1969) are sufficient for bringing about particular subjectivities. Moreover, they may do so without worrying about becoming behaviourists who understand subjectivity as nothing more than a predictable response to environmental stimuli. With this in mind, consider the

insights gleaned from Merleau-Ponty's event.

Within the now-differentiated event of experience, the relationship between subjects and objects may now be considered in further detail. That the once disjunct events can become unified demonstrates their undifferentiatedness as elements of nature – that is, their mutual *hyletic* character. The experiencing subject may now be explored as the process of conscious discrimination. This can be understood less as an agentive action than as a possibility of being drawn into a particular relationship with an object. For example, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) compares “the relations” of subject and object – which he will later call sentient and sensible (1964/1968) – “with those of the sleeper to his slumber”.

Sleep comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at as a significance, suddenly becomes a situation. ... [I]n the same way the sensible has not only a motor and vital significance, but is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon by our body... (pp. 211-212)

Merleau-Ponty describes how the event of experience is not initiated by a subject but takes hold of an entity *as* a subject. It would be inaccurate to speak of sleep as something that is actively managed by a subject. In the subject we find qualities that more closely resemble a classical object—the latter unable to exercise control over its own actions or environment. Even before the introduction of the term “reversibility”, Merleau-Ponty is thus confronting the possibility of reversible flesh. As efforts continue in the direction of understanding the subjectivity of nonhuman entities (e.g., the conference and workshop on *Approaching Posthumanism and the Posthuman*, held in Geneva in June 2015), we can expect to see a greater sophistication in the latter's investigation. For the moment, however, it is only important that we see the space that Husserl and Merleau-Ponty alike have made for such investigation in his ontology.

Entities that resist intentional capture: Hyletic or material data

We have seen how Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) has made room in his ontology to allow for Husserl's

hylé: it is only by virtue of the ontological identity of undifferentiated worldly entities as *hylé* that subject-object reversibility is possible. This conceptualization avoids the suggestion that the sleeper is, for the most part, a subject, to whom all of the privileges of subjectivity are awarded. Instead, it may be understood that one must also look to the conditions out of which intentionality emerged – that is, the *hyletic* or *material data* – “which”, we remember, “contains in itself nothing intentional”.

The question remains as to whether or not we can understand *hyletic data* before it is captured by intentionality. This has been the goal in the efforts of what could be termed the post-phenomenologies – Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology* and Trigg's “Unhuman Phenomenology” and *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror*. Bogost (2012) specifically targets the being of nonhuman objects and speculates about their relations with one another. Trigg (2013) targets the uncanny elements in human experience. Both authors attempt to push phenomenological ontology beyond the boundary of determining the world's significance only through human consciousness. Such attempts are not unfamiliar to Merleau-Ponty – certainly not in *The Visible and the Invisible*, but also not in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the latter, he may be found outlining the vague and uncertain haze of ontologically pre-established entities:

One cannot, as we have said, conceive any perceived thing without someone to perceive it. But the fact remains that the thing presents itself to the person who perceives it as a thing in itself, and thus poses the problem of a genuine *in-itself-for-us*. Ordinarily we do not notice this because our perception, in the context of our everyday concerns, alights on things sufficiently attentively to discover in them their familiar presence, but not sufficiently so to disclose the nonhuman element which lies hidden in them. (p. 322)

Merleau-Ponty begins by telling us that, insofar as a thing is *perceived as a thing*, then its identity as an object is already established in relation to the subjectivity by whom it is perceived. This is to say that an object *as object* may be understood through the event of familiarity to a subject. This experience is often attributed to the object: it is because of the object that one has an experience of familiarity. But the object as object is incapable of presenting as an ambiguity. Indeed, a null objective form would be no object at all – its objectivity would remain unestablished. It would thus be ontologically neutral: neither object nor subject. We have called entities with this ontological neutrality *hylé* because they form the stratum from which intentionality has yet to emerge.

Correlationism requires that an entity may only be understood as an object – and, moreover, an object-for-me. This position thus begins by limiting the possibility of understanding the ontological depth of objects. Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) attempts to correct this position by tracing the relationships of objects with other objects – that is, exploring the object in-itself-for-other-objects. OOO recognizes that there is more to a thing than meets the (human) eye. But it is important to assert that, in this passage, Merleau-Ponty is not conceding that the object in-itself-for-me exhausts the entity of the depth of its being. He indicates that there is quite likely a non-human element which withdraws from any human view – an element that belongs to the entity which cannot be captured by the human subject. Here he continues:

But the thing holds itself aloof from us and remains self-sufficient. This will become clear if we suspend our ordinary preoccupations and pay a metaphysical and disinterested attention to it. It is then hostile and alien, no longer an interlocutor, but a resolutely silent other, a Self which evades us no less than does intimacy with an outside consciousness. (p. 322)

It may be understood that the “thing” to which Merleau-Ponty is referring in this passage is *hylé*. A thing that remains aloof to me is no object of my perception, nor is it a familiar physiognomy. As it lurks about on the borders of my subjectivity, it resolutely resists capture. I may descend upon it with my gaze, thereby possessing it as a familiar thing, but grasping only its in-itself-for-me. The lurking thing might also be the winter ‘flu – content to hover at the periphery of my consciousness for several days through barely discernible manifestations of fatigue, cognitive unclarity, aches and depression until at last it descends upon me in all of its fury, demanding of me all that is most ‘flu-like. In this instance, it is I who am at the mercy of the virus.

Conclusion: Ultimate Consciousness and Ultimate Subjectivity

Husserl (1913/2002) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) have both indicated a possible consequence of deeply considering the *hylé* as an antecedent condition for intentionality. If it is accepted that one could investigate the as yet ontologically undifferentiated matter – that is, *hylé* – then how does one overcome the dualism of matter and form? Must we concede that Husserl’s “twofold bed” of phenomenology admits a dualism? To be sure, this is a question that has been central to Eastern contemplative traditions for over twenty-five centuries. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty alike come up against this problem, although

neither solves the conundrum in a satisfactory manner. This is perfectly understandable.

Husserl notes how “intentionality ... resembled a universal medium which in the last resort includes within itself all experiences, even those that are not characterized as intentional” (p. 174). This line of thinking, he admits, “stops short of descending into the obscure depths of the ultimate consciousness which constitutes the whole scheme of temporal experience...”. With the aid of speculation, Husserl seems to be suggesting a meta-intentionality in which *hylé* and *morphe* form a meaningful unity. This is the Greek equivalent of the Eastern riddle that matter is form and form is matter.

While Husserl solves the duality of matter and form by fusing them into an ultimate consciousness, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) solves this by dissolving the categories entirely. He writes:

There is no *hylé*, no sensation which is not in communication with other sensations or the sensations of other people, and for this very reason there is no *morphe*, no apprehension or apperception, the office of which is to give significance to a matter that has none, and to ensure the *a priori* unity of my experience. (p. 405)

Whereas Husserl unifies *hylé* and *morphe* into the ultimate intentional consciousness, Merleau-Ponty refuses to allow the participation of a “primordial *I*” (p. 404). For to posit an ultimate consciousness would run into the infinite regress of positing a thing for which the primordial *I* could become conscious, and so on. Instead of collapsing *hylé* and *morphe*, Merleau-Ponty has dissolved them, concluding that “[t]he belief in an absolute mind, or in a world in itself detached from us, is no more than a rationalization of this primordial faith” (p. 409). For now, it is safe to conclude that phenomenological ontology has not yet solved the 25-century-old riddle of the antinomy and unity of matter and form.

In this paper, I have defended a phenomenological ontology that follows the speculative realist critique of correlationism. This is important, because this critique implies that phenomenology is incapable of extending beyond the mid-20th century intentional subject. I have argued that this criticism is an insightful, but nevertheless not debilitating, one for phenomenological ontology. It is insightful because it allows phenomenologists to retire from the battle against the 19th century mechanomorphism of the human. It is not debilitating because phenomenology has always been broader than its critique of 19th century mechanomorphism and emphasizes on human experience and existence. To make this last point, I

have returned to Husserl's (1913/2002) discussion of *hylé*, which has been demonstrated through Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. In these we have found an ontology that is broad enough to allow phenomenologists to explore *hylé* and *nous*. In order for phenomenological ontology to survive the criticism that it is correlationist, it must also allow for

the phenomenological emphasis on *hylé*. This is not a new or even radical idea in phenomenology, as Husserl has shown. However, it has been long overshadowed by the once-important defensive posturing against 19th century brands of realism. This demon, speculative realists have demonstrated, has been exorcised.

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