

## Reconstructing Phenomenal Realism in Heidegger's Ontology: Beyond the Speculative Turn

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**Abstract:** This paper challenges speculative realism's attempt to overcome correlationism by returning to Heidegger's ontology of the phenomenon. While speculative realism rejects representationalism, it nonetheless remains bound to the metaphysical opposition between presence and absence, treating what is real as that which lies beyond all access. Against this view, I argue that Heidegger articulates a form of phenomenal realism in which reality is not opposed to appearance; rather, it is encountered through phenomenality itself. Reality can appear insofar as Being is held open within the finite and historical site of thought—that is, within Dasein's way of being. Here, Being withdraws from fixation as determinate truth and remains as untruth, or as ceaseless becoming. Within this co-belonging of thought and Being, beings come to presence as beings, and phenomenality takes place as real. By clarifying this structure, the paper develops a non-metaphysical realism that preserves the reality of beings without abandoning the correlation, thus reopening the question of Being beyond the anti-correlationist horizon.

**Keywords:** Heidegger, phenomenon, speculative realism, thinking

Traditional philosophy has long constructed an understanding of Being that reduces it to an identical, immutable One—the most constant presence. Heidegger refers to this understanding of Being as the “metaphysics of presence.”<sup>1</sup> Within this framework, beings are no longer encountered in their own right but are interpreted through this conception of Being, as if their reality could be exhausted by reference to a universal essence.

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<sup>1</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, GA 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), 218 and Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 104.

This metaphysical edifice has reached its limit, turning its violence back upon the human itself. Contemporary philosophy increasingly seeks to move beyond anthropocentrism,<sup>2</sup> questioning the privilege accorded to human cognition in determining what counts as real. Under the heading of speculative realism, recent thought has attempted to access the reality of beings apart from human cognition, promising a realism no longer confined within the limits of correlation.

However, this attempt often proceeds by removing thought altogether, in the name of securing realism. Yet such a gesture risks blocking the very possibility of responding to the human crisis through concrete forms of action. More fundamentally, eliminating thought may not be the proper way to rescue the understanding of Being from the ontology of presence. If presence is overcome only by excluding thought, reality is merely displaced into absence, thereby remaining within the same metaphysical opposition that defines the metaphysics of presence, rather than being genuinely rethought.

It is in light of this problem that I turn to Heidegger and reinterpret Being not in terms of presence or absence but as an event that gives itself in and through the phenomenon. By doing this, this paper aims to secure both the reality of beings and the distinctiveness of human agency without reverting to anthropocentrism.

### The Limits of Speculative Realism

Contemporary philosophy has increasingly sought to overcome the anthropocentric legacy of modern metaphysics through the rejection of correlationism—the claim that reality can only be accessed as a correlate of human thought. Speculative realism emerges from this ambition, aiming to think reality as existing independently of human representation. Yet while speculative realism is unified by this anti-correlationist impulse, it remains internally divided over the ontological standing of that reality.

Within speculative realism, two influential orientations stand in tension. On the one hand, New Materialism conceives reality as constituted by relational flows, treating beings as temporary condensations within pre-individual relations. Relations are ontologically primary, and agency is attributed to immanent material dynamics rather than to discrete entities. On

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<sup>2</sup> Levi Bryant similarly criticizes Heidegger by situating him within a strong correlationist lineage. In *The Democracy of Objects*, Bryant characterizes the Kant–Heidegger–Lacan sequence as a “correlationist tradition” and argues that correlationism remains fundamentally anthropocentric insofar as being is thought only in relation to thought, thereby rendering all ontological claims implicitly claims about being-for-humans. See Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 38.

the other hand, Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) insists on the irreducibility of individual beings, maintaining that objects possess an intrinsic propriety that cannot be exhausted by their relations, effects, or uses.

Graham Harman articulates this opposition through his critique of two dominant modes of reduction. “Undermining” reduces beings to a more fundamental substratum, while “overmining” reduces them to their effects, functions, or relations. Harman argues that New Materialism performs both reductions simultaneously—a strategy he terms “duominning”—thereby collapsing beings into relationism.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, if beings are nothing but momentary configurations within relational flux, change can only take the form of recombination. Genuine novelty, by contrast, requires rupture—change originating from within a being itself.<sup>4</sup>

To secure this possibility, Harman introduces the thesis of withdrawal. Objects enter into relations through their qualities, yet their real being is never fully present in any encounter. This withdrawal is ontological rather than merely epistemic: objects retain a surplus of reality beyond whatever they affect or produce.<sup>5</sup> Relations, accordingly, cannot be taken as ontologically primitive but require explanation.

At this point, OOO presents itself as a decisive alternative to New Materialism. Whereas New Materialism absolutizes relations, OOO subordinates relations to objects that withdraw from them. Yet it is precisely here that serious difficulties emerge. Despite Harman’s anti-anthropocentric intentions, relations are implicitly modeled on modes of access, such that what an object does not present within a relation is treated as withdrawn in itself.

Shaviro criticizes Harman’s notion of withdrawal for failing to sustain absolute non-relation, arguing that it ultimately reconfigures withdrawal as a problem of access and affect rather than ontological independence. In Harman’s example of fire burning cotton, the emphasis falls on a selective engagement with certain qualities. Shaviro counters that in such interactions, multiple determinations are in fact altered or destroyed regardless of access or thematization. What is presented as ontological interaction thus collapses into a logic of selective encounter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 166–171.

<sup>5</sup> See Graham Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 10. On the claim that change or motion requires a non-relational form of actuality and that objects exceed their effects, see Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 278.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Shaviro, “Consequences of Panpsychism,” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. by Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 19–44.

Robert Booth radicalizes this critique by targeting the conceptual structure of withdrawal itself. He argues that both relation and non-relation are defined with reference to perception: reality either appears partially or withholds itself entirely. As a result, non-relation is not articulated as a positive ontological mode, but only as the inverse of access.<sup>7</sup>

Magdalena Hoły-Luczaj pushes the problem further by questioning the ontological cost of withdrawal. When withdrawal is generalized to all beings equally, material specificity is eroded: fragile, concrete entities are treated in the same terms as ideal or mathematical objects. The attempt to secure object autonomy thus risks an abstraction that undermines the very realism OOO seeks to defend.<sup>8</sup>

Taken together, these critiques reveal a paradox at the heart of speculative realism. In rejecting the metaphysics of presence, OOO relocates reality into what never appears, aligning reality with absence, while New Materialism situates reality in pre-present potentiality. In both cases, the opposition between presence and absence remains intact.

The failure of speculative realism, then, lies not in its anti-anthropocentric ambition, but in its inability to think individuality and relationality together. What is required is an ontology in which beings are real in and through their appearing, without being reduced to representation. The following section argues that such a framework can be found in Heidegger's concept of the phenomenon, understood not as mere appearance but as an event in which reality and thought are co-appropriated. This orientation may be provisionally named phenomenal realism.

### **Phenomenon and the Possibility of Realism beyond Presence and Absence**

Speculative realism seeks to overcome the metaphysics of presence by excluding correlation and displacing reality beyond manifestation. Yet despite their opposed strategies, both new materialism and object-oriented ontology remain governed by the same oppositional schema: what is present is aligned with subjectivity and appearance, while what is real is secured only by being displaced elsewhere—either into relational flux or into a withdrawn interior. The difficulty, therefore, lies not in the critique of presence as such,

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Booth, "Abject Withdrawal? On the Prospect of a Non-anthropocentric Object-Oriented Ontology," in *Angelaki*, 26:5 (2021), 20–37.

<sup>8</sup> Magdalena Hoły-Luczaj, "Non-anthropocentric Philosophy Between Object-Oriented and Thing-Oriented Ontology, or on Some Repetition in the History of Philosophy," in *Studia z Historii Filozofii*, 9:3 (2018), 169–189. Hoły-Luczaj situates the debate between object-oriented ontology and new materialism within a broader non-anthropocentric tradition, drawing on Twardowski and Kotarbiński, and argues that OOO's concept of the object risks excessive abstraction at the expense of material specificity.

but in the persistence of the presence–absence dichotomy that continues to structure these ontological strategies.

From the perspective of speculative realism, phenomenology appears incapable of securing reality without reintroducing dependence on human access. However refined its analyses may be, phenomenology is taken to remain bound to the correlation between the human and the world, and thus to reduce reality to what is accessible within that relation. On this view, a genuine realism would require severing the bond between manifestation and reality, thereby allowing objects to exist in their own right, independently of any mode of access.<sup>9</sup>

Heidegger's concept of the phenomenon offers a different point of departure. The phenomenon does not name what is merely given to a subject, but what shows itself from itself. Appearance, in this sense, does not signify epistemic accessibility but an ontological occurrence. Heidegger explicitly states in *Being and Time* that although his analysis begins from Husserl's notion of intentionality, it radicalizes it by transforming intentionality into an ontological problem rather than an epistemological one.<sup>10</sup> Intentionality no longer designates an inner act of consciousness directed toward an object, but a standing within the openness in which beings come to show themselves. Showing and receiving are two inseparable moments of a single event of disclosure.

Because of this transformation, the phenomenon cannot be understood as a mere content of consciousness. Even when a being is apprehended in perception, it does not collapse into the manner in which it appears. Rather, it manifests itself as something that exceeds the meanings or functions through which it is grasped. Heidegger makes this point explicit in *What Is a Thing?* when he insists that “the thing does not merely appear, but shows itself,” and that this showing-itself is precisely the manner in which the real is real.<sup>11</sup> What appears, therefore, is not a subjective projection, but the self-manifestation of a being that remains irreducible to its appearing.

From the standpoint of speculative realism, however, such an appeal to the phenomenon may appear suspect, insofar as correlation is understood

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<sup>9</sup> Graham Harman understands much of modern philosophy as a “philosophy of access,” insofar as reality is approached primarily through relations of appearance, manifestation, or correlation. Within this framework, phenomenology is treated as one variant of correlationist thought rather than as a genuine alternative to it. Harman's correlationist critique of phenomenology is developed most explicitly through his engagement with Tom Sparrow. See Graham Harman, *Skirmishes: With Friends, Enemies, and Neutrals* (Santa Barbara, CA: punctum books, 2020), 25ff.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, GA 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 38.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Was ist ein Ding?*, GA 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1984), 103.

as an inescapable reduction of reality to human access, rendering any relation between being and thought a residual form of anthropocentrism. Heidegger's analysis, by contrast, operates with a fundamentally different understanding of correlation. Correlation does not name a relation between a subject and an object, but the belonging-together of Being and understanding within the event of disclosure.<sup>12</sup> Understanding (*Verstehen*) belongs to the disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*) of Being itself and is therefore ontological rather than epistemological.<sup>13</sup>

To deny correlation in this sense would not liberate reality from human involvement but would render it mute. A reality entirely divorced from any mode of understanding might be posited in abstraction, but it could no longer be articulated as reality at all. What is lost in the rejection of correlation is not merely representation, but the very possibility of a world in which beings can appear as beings. Heidegger's position avoids this impasse by refusing to identify understanding with conceptual mastery.

The contrast with Kant clarifies what is at stake. By locating affection in the thing in itself, Kant situates reality beyond the phenomenon and thereby severs appearance from the real. Even if Kant avoids a strong form of correlationism, the consequence remains that concrete experience can never amount to an encounter with reality itself. Heidegger rejects this framework. Reality is not concealed behind appearance but encountered within it. Appearance is not the mode in which a being comes to full presence or complete availability. This non-fulfillment does not indicate a lack or deficiency, since no transcendental entity is presupposed as having to be completed through appearing. What must now be asked is what the truth of Being as it appears in this way is.

### Being as the Giving of Reality in Withdrawal

If the phenomenon cannot be equated with full presence, this limitation cannot be explained in terms of epistemic access or cognitive finitude alone. Rather, it must be grounded in the structure of Being itself.<sup>14</sup> Heidegger articulates this structure through his rethinking of truth.

For Heidegger, truth is not correspondence between thought and object, but the original event in which beings come into their own. In this sense, truth is not simply revealing, but *aletheia*: an event in which revealing

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<sup>12</sup> I assume that the question of how beings come to presence within phenomenality remains operative throughout Heidegger's work, even as its articulation undergoes significant transformation.

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §§31–33.

<sup>14</sup> I use "Being" to render both "Sein" and "Seyn." In citations of *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, "Being" refers to "Seyn" understood eventually (*Ereignis*).

always takes place together with concealing. As Heidegger emphasizes, the truth of Being is at the same time untruth. This does not mean that truth fails, but that Being gives itself only finitely, in and through this simultaneous revealing and concealing.<sup>15</sup>

This finitude becomes explicit in Heidegger's account of the thing as the fourfold (*Geviert*). Sky opens the dimension of advent, while earth shelters and resists; divinities signify inexhaustibility, while mortals delimit finitude. In their gathering, these dimensions are brought to presentification (*Gegenwärtigen*). Presentification is not the full presence of Being, but the finite staging of its coming-forth. What appears does so only within this finite configuration.

Each time Dasein appropriates itself, it discloses beings within a determinate horizon. Such disclosed-ness is always particular and finite.<sup>16</sup> It is precisely through this finitude that Being can come to presence as beings. Yet because Being is different from beings, it cannot be reduced to or exhausted by the beings that are thus presented. Being grants itself only in and through such finite disclosure. In this sense, Being does not stand behind beings as an identical ground, but comes to presence only in a manner that resists complete identification.<sup>17</sup>

Because presentification does not exhaust Being, it cannot remain a singular occurrence. Rather, the finitude of disclosure makes possible the continual renewal of manifestation, through which Being gives itself anew, each time only as a finite event.<sup>18</sup> In this repetition, thinking bears the span of ontological difference (*Austrag des Seinsunterschieds*),<sup>19</sup> through which Being belongs together with time.<sup>20</sup> Finite thinking, far from obstructing this generative movement of Being, safeguards it by letting Being come to presence anew each time.

From this perspective, withdrawal does not exclude thought but demands it. Being is only insofar as it manifests itself as beings, and its withdrawal names not non-manifestation but manifestation in a finite mode.<sup>21</sup> Harman's claim that beings withdraw from one another, thereby

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<sup>15</sup> On the difference between Harman's notion of withdrawal and Heidegger's account of concealment, see Peter Gratton, *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 133.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, GA 65 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 327–330.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 410–412.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Das Ereignis*, GA 71 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2009), 255.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, GA 14 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007), 20–22.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, GA 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), 310.

relegating manifestation to the non-real, fails to distinguish between the withdrawal of Being from its finite disclosure and the withdrawal of beings from cognitive access. Heidegger's ontology, by contrast, affirms that reality gives itself only in and through finite manifestation. Thought, far from compromising realism, belongs to the very way in which Being grants itself—and thus calls for further clarification.

### Thinking as the Historical Site of Truth

Any realism that reflects on the finite presencing of Being must account for thought. Yet this does not mean that any form of thinking is thereby capable of encountering reality as reality. If Being gives itself only in finite manifestation, then the question is not whether thought should be excluded, but what role thought plays within such finitude, and under what conditions it can receive what gives itself as real. Since beings can be experienced as themselves only insofar as thought remains finite in accord with the finitude of Being,<sup>22</sup> thought must endure its finitude as the site through which Being unfolds eventually, temporally, and historically.

In receiving Being's grant—which gives reality precisely through withdrawal—thought is bound to the destiny of Being. To appropriate beings is not merely to register what is present, but to unfold the joint co-presence of beings within an inherited, communal, and historical understanding of Being. Such an understanding carries a weight that cannot be arbitrarily dismissed. Yet to remember the mystery of Being is also to endure its finitude: for Being to arrive anew, what has already been given must be surpassed—and even a long history of oblivion can pass away. Thought thus receives its inheritance only by exceeding it.

Heidegger gives concrete form to this mode of thought through poetic saying and mortal dwelling.<sup>23</sup> Poetic saying responds to the call of Being without reducing beings to fixed meanings. It sets boundaries while allowing new possibilities to emerge.<sup>24</sup> Dwelling names the enactment of

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz*, GA 26 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1978), 199.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger continues, even in his later work, to understand the *da* of Dasein as the open site in which beings show themselves as a whole. The Event grants the *da* as the open for the self-showing of beings as a whole. In this sense, his account converges with what he calls the originary gathering (*Versammlung*) of beings as a whole: in *Logos* (GA 7), the logos is thought as the primordial gathering that first lets beings as a whole come to presence, while in *Heraklit* (GA 55) this gathering is articulated in terms of the *panta* as the *Seiende im Ganzen*. See Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, GA 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 223, 226 and Martin Heidegger, *Heraklit*, GA 55 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1979), 264, 332.

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 304, 312.

world-formation: to let the world arrive as world,<sup>25</sup> woven from the interrelation of things. Such letting is possible only because Dasein is mortal.<sup>26</sup>

Mortality here does not signify a biological end but the capacity to bear finitude as one's own. To be mortal is to take up death as a constant possibility and thereby to bear the Da—not as an empty channel, but as a finite self enduring its own exposure.<sup>27</sup> This endurance is not mechanical persistence. If it were, destiny would collapse into an unchangeable fate, foreign to the essence of Being itself. Rather, in enduring its finitude, thought actively opens a path for the unfolding of Being.

Against object-oriented ontology, which removes thought and thereby erases the site of transformation, Heidegger shows that thought is neither anthropocentric mastery nor passive submission. Finite thought participates in the genesis of Being by sustaining the co-belonging of truth and time. In doing so, it assumes responsibility—not for dominating beings, but for keeping open the historical site in which Being can still arrive otherwise.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to articulate the legitimacy of phenomenal realism. Against the widespread assumption that, because thought intervenes in the reception of beings, reality must lie outside appearance, I have argued that rejecting representationalism or anthropocentrism does not entail rejecting thought as such. To preserve the power to transform history, ontology must not exclude thought but acknowledge the factuality that we think, and that beings appear in thought.

Such acknowledgment begins in remembering the origination of beings—Being that gives itself and withdraws. Appropriation, as the sole way in which Being exists, unfolds not in infinity but within finitude, as ongoing generation. To see this is to accept a deeper humility, in which thought responds not by mastery but by attentiveness to the coming of Being.

This view does not place the human at a privileged center from the outset. The existential mode named Dasein—openness to Being through finitude—does not exhaust the ways in which beings encounter one another. Yet such decentering must not lead to the erasure of human distinctiveness. For while agency unfolds in varying modes and degrees, the human way of existing—world-forming, horizon-projecting, and marked by anxiety, hesitation, and regret—bears a distinctive responsibility for beings as a whole.

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<sup>25</sup> Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 180.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, 211.

In this way, thinking is no longer tasked with securing reality by excluding itself but is instead situated within the phenomenon as a responsive engagement with what shows itself while withdrawing. This responsibility of thought lies above all in questioning—pressing beyond established understandings—and in sustaining such questioning, the path of thinking beyond the metaphysics of presence remains open

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