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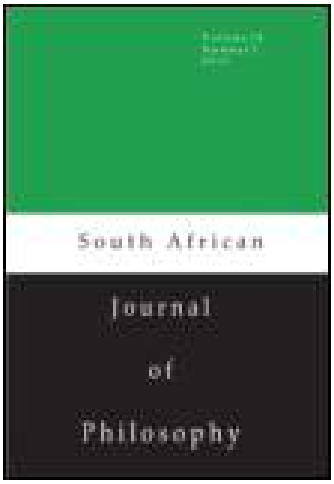

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Christopher Allsobrook[a]

[a] Centre for Leadership Ethics in Africa, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa

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Phenomenology as first philosophy[1]

Christopher Allsobrook
Centre for Leadership Ethics in Africa, University of Fort Hare, Alice, South Africa
callsobrook@ufh.ac.za

The paper interprets phenomenology as a mode of inquiry that addresses fundamental questions of first philosophy, beyond the limitation of the practice by its leading theorists to the study of mere appearances. I draw on Adorno's critique of phenomenology to show that it has typically functioned as a mode of first philosophy, but I part with Adorno to argue that it ought to be practiced as such, to address consciously a sceptical worry about the gap between appearance and reality that Husserl modestly claimed to have bracketed. Noting Husserl's and Adorno's shared worries about the project of first philosophy, to know the world beyond appearances, I draw on Nietzsche to argue phenomenology ought nonetheless to address real matters of concern.

Like Martin Heidegger's engagement with Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno's critiques of phenomenology and ontology are subordinate to extrinsic purposes of developing and elaborating his own point of view. The role of Nietzsche in Heidegger's *Nietzsche* is by no means spurious, but it is his appropriation and displacement that proves most fruitful for the philosophy of Heidegger. Likewise, this appraisal of phenomenology as a mode of first philosophy displaces its essential formulation as a study of *phenomena*, that is, of the appearances of things, as we conceive of them, irrespective of their essential nature or independent existence. This constructive project builds on Adorno's critique of phenomenology, to assess the merit of his attempts in *Against Epistemology* [*AE*] and *Negative Dialectics* [*ND*] to clarify his own philosophical project in contradistinction to phenomenology. However, whereas Adorno rejects phenomenology for reverting to first philosophy, which it sets aside, I argue that the study of appearances ought to be understood as a scientific mode of inquiry, which reaches beyond phenomena to address reality in virtue of qualitative *matters of concern*, beyond the limitations of quantitative *matters of fact* (to use Bruno Latour's terms). Phenomenology, along with its defetishising critique, could provide descriptions to help scientists to penetrate the mere phenomenal appearances we find in reality, since our real concerns are – after all – to be found in that which lies behind these appearances.

I begin with a question from Bruno Latour about the role of critical social explanations for scientific facts, in an age of suspicion and disbelief, when *defetishising critique* (that is, criticism of established facts as 'social constructs') has been made 'small and cheap' through overuse (Latour 2004: p. 230). Latour is a notorious social constructivist about the methods and findings of science, but he argues that problematising the self-evidence of *matters of fact* should not subtract from an underlying concern to bear witness to the rich *matters of concern* that are the true empirical objects of 'experience and experimentation' at the basis of scientific knowledge and investigation (ibid. p. 247). Sceptical defetishising critique, I argue, in sympathy, is an essential aspect of first philosophy, a manifestation of ongoing concern for secure, authoritative normative foundations. Its present-day dysfunctional hyperactivity, however, reflects widespread and radical insecurity in this respect. I argue, with Adorno, that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, a defetishising critique of mathematised nature, is also a project in first philosophy, despite its disavowal of the natural attitude. However, I do not agree with Adorno that phenomenology should

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be rejected as first philosophy. On the contrary, I argue that it ought to be construed consciously as such. I draw on Nietzsche's history of truth, in *Twilight of the Idols* (Nietzsche 1976, hereafter *TI*), to suggest that scientists ought to take advantage of phenomenology by broadening its range beyond mere appearances.

Matters of concern beyond defetishising critique

The issue of compromised immanent criticism raised by the critical theorist, Adorno, is not explicitly addressed by Latour, but they both address a similar problem of co-opted critique in late capitalist society. It is Latour's response, particularly his terms of reference, which I wish to draw upon, later on, with respect to Adorno's negative appraisal of phenomenology. With so much destruction in the world today, asked Latour, in 2004 (in the midst of the War on Terror and the speculative spiral leading up to the 2008 financial crash, whose effects gutted the humanities), should the humanities be adding deconstruction to the pile? (Latour 2004: p. 225). Drawing critical attention toward special interests and to uncertainties around established scientific 'matters of fact' has not proved as liberating as many critical social theorists had hoped. 'Defetishising critique' gives social explanations for supposedly objective facts, which reveal them to be projections of extrinsic social relations, functioning for entrenched interests. But heavy polluting industries and tobacco companies, for example, have exploited distrust of scientific evidence fanned by such criticism. Thus, 'valuable, hard-won evidence that could save lives is dismissed as biased' (ibid. p.227). Latour cites Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello to note that the new spirit of capitalism has put to good use the artistic critique that was supposed to destroy it (ibid. p. 231).

What once cost Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin very dearly, Latour maintains, has been made 'small and cheap' like the computer's central processing unit, which once filled a room. Everything is now suspicious but such widespread, unfocused, immediate critical suspicion is to no rational avail. Such suspicion is as good as naïve superstition for the functioning of hegemony. Latour responds that critique has been directed against the wrong enemies, by wrong allies, who stand back from empirical facts, to debunk them from a distance. Critique, Latour argues, should not move *away* from facts but, rather, towards the conditions that make such facts possible, since distancing 'accepts too uncritically what matters of facts were', sticking closely to the tools and insights of Kant (ibid. p. 231). Critique should not be fighting empiricism but, instead, seeking to renew it, to get closer to facts, by focusing on the 'highly complex, historically situated, richly diverse' matters of concern that belong to empirical experience. Matters of fact are not all that is given in experience but, as he agrees with Alfred Whitehead, 'only very partial renderings of matters of concern, and only a subset of *states of affairs*' (ibid. pp. 237, 244).

The debunking impetus of the Enlightenment – waged against the mythic projection and displacement of socio-economic relations into fetishised conceptual fictions – 'runs out of steam' when it turns with 'critical barbarity' against facts by merely subtracting reality from them, without protecting and caring for matters of concern which they manifest. 'To accuse something of being a fetish is the ultimate gratuitous, disrespectful, insane and barbarous gesture,' writes Latour. One ought to talk about the celebrated facts of science and technology with care and concern (ibid. pp. 237–241), since '[e]ven the so-called weak objects, those that appear to be candidates for the accusation of anti-fetishism, were never mere projections on an empty screen', he continues, echoing Marx's critique of Feuerbach and Stirner's superficial rejection of religious ideas in *The German Ideology*. Critique should not turn away from the facts, but should instead call attention to 'how many participants are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and maintain it' (ibid. p. 246). The critic should not debunk, but offer 'arenas of gathering', since 'if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile' (ibid. p. 247).

One of the best defences against the truth, it would seem, is candour. One may point to the considerable tenacity of the haplessly and patently corrupt Italian politician, Silvio Berlusconi, of whom Slavoj Zizek remarks, in *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, '[t]he silent acceptance of Berlusconi as Fate is perhaps the saddest aspect of his reign: his democracy is a democracy of those who, as it were, win by default, who rule through cynical demoralisation', writes Zizek, at the end of the second Bush regime in the USA. By contrast with the new figure of the 'Teflon'

president, impervious to criticism and no longer expected even to stick to his own electoral programme, the last 'genuinely tragic' U.S. president was Richard Nixon, who was, at least, 'a crook who fell victim to the gap between his ideals and ambitions and the reality of his acts' (Zizek 2009: pp. 48–49). The 'human all too human' figures of Berlusconi and G. W. Bush, under the 'new spirit of capitalism', drawing on the anti-authoritarian rhetoric of 1968, encourage an acceptance by ordinary people that is misled, since 'beneath the clownish mask there is a mastery of state power functioning with ruthless efficiency' (ibid. p. 51). 'Continuous self-mockery in no way impedes the efficiency… This is indeed how ideology functions today: nobody takes democracy or justice seriously, we are all aware of their corrupted nature, but we participate in them, because we assume that they work even if we do not believe in them…'. Thus, '[e]ven if Berlusconi is a clown, we should therefore not laugh at him too much – perhaps, by doing so, we are already playing his game' (ibid. p. 51).

Disinformation and manufactured ignorance subsumes the critical impetus, as one story among various options. The recurrence of this theme of critical impotence among social critics demonstrates sensitivity to the threat of this situation to the traditional role of independent intellectuals. Harry Frankfurt's work on what he calls 'bullshit' – not so much deceitful misrepresentation as much as 'careless indifference' to how things are (Frankfurt 2005: p. 8), not so much false but phony (ibid. p. 12) – likewise recalls the phrase, 'never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through', since the consequences of punishment are less severe. Moreover, a greater liability for the liar, by comparison, is that she 'is inescapably concerned with truth-values' (ibid. p. 13). The 'bullshitter's horizon' is more panoramic and creative; he need not lie to misrepresent what he is up to. The fact he hides 'is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him… His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are… He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose…' (ibid. p. 14). Even 'sincerity itself,' Frankfurt ends wryly, 'is bullshit' (ibid. p. 15).

Though Frankfurt, with tongue in cheek, overstates his case about the disregard of the 'bullshitter' for the actual state of reality, he picks up on a dominant contemporary theme for the age of the internet. I have referred, so far, to the reflections of various figures on the potentially abusive ideological functions for widespread sceptical defetishising critique, in an age of easy access to information accompanied by instability in criteria of normative merit. I do so to introduce and contextualise the defetishising critique of phenomenology on which the paper will focus, in the work of Adorno, as well as the concept of defetishising critique itself, which involves unveiling the ascription of subjective or intersubjective motivations and qualities, in objective terms, to factual aspects of empirical reality, disguising subjective aspects of experience (concerns), to avoid responsibility for consequent discursive positions (take, for example, Tony Blair's genuine, but suspiciously convenient, faith in the existence of Iraq's secret 'weapons of mass destruction' used as evidence to justify invasion of the country in 2003).

Though I focus on Adorno's critique of phenomenology it is important to note that he, caught between positivist ideology and cultural relativism, was one of the first theorists to draw attention to the deficiencies of classical Marxist *immanent critique*, given widespread disillusionment, under late capitalist modernity, with the high ideals of Victorian moralism that Marx once held up for criticism. Marx points to *internal* contradictions of capitalism, reluctant to stipulate conditions of communism in advance of their historical manifestation in the hands of the objective agents of history: the productive class of labourers. His defetishising critique of capital deflates the hubris of those who do not physically work, who think they are the causes of the political and cultural phenomena they lord over, failing to recognise these phenomena as direct determinations, or, *mere phenomenal effects*, of real underlying productive economic activity, where humanity actualises itself by transforming nature (see the sardonic section five, of chapter three, in *The German Ideology*, '"Stirner" Delighted in His Construction' [Marx & Engels 1968], for an early example of Marx's defetishising critique). At least liberal, bourgeois ideology, Adorno reckons, with nostalgia for an honest target, 'contains an historically conditioned moment of truth against which the pathic rationality of existing conditions can be judged… ascribing to objects properties they could only

acquire under improved conditions and therefore tacitly denouncing existing conditions' (Cook 2001: p. 9). These days, however, he writes (during World War II):

> The deeper the divergence of an opposition from the established order, which at least affords it a refuge from a blacker future, the more easily Fascists can pin it down to untruths… The conversion of all questions of truth to questions of power… has attacked the very heart of the distinction between true and false… (Adorno 1973: §71).

In contrast to 'idealist' ideology, which covers over conditions of domination with free-floating high ideals, 'realist' ideology (cultural relativism or positivism) just 'legitimates existing conditions, by identifying its concepts with them', objectively seeking to establish what the world is already like (ibid. §135). This is true not only of fascist Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, but also of the consumerist model of capitalism of the post-war USA. Realist ideology, maintains Adorno, in sympathy with the worries of Latour, Zizek and Frankfurt, discussed above, no longer offers a vindication of reality, as liberal ideology used to do. Rather, today the critic is confronted by a different form of consciousness, which has dispensed with all thought that does not conform to reality, simply presenting the empirical justification – for substantive political and economic asymmetries – that *this is how things are* (Adorno 1967: p. 29). Radical economic inequality is unfortunate, but this is how things are. Climate change, as a matter of concern, is unavoidable, since, as a matter of fact, economic growth must go on.

First philosophy and its defetishising critique

Before I begin to assess Adorno's critique of phenomenology, it is necessary to introduce a claim that is central to this paper, namely, that defetishising critique is essential to first philosophy. By this I mean that the positive project of first philosophy inevitably calls itself into question through the negative defetishising critique that it entails. First philosophy is also its defetishising critique. Defetishising critique begins with the Archimedean quest: 'Give me one fixed point and I will move the world'. If we can just find a first principle or variable by which we can know reality as it truly is, there is nothing we cannot change. The slogan points out the gap between the subjective form and objective content of phenomenal reality, apprehended in consciousness, such that the criteria by which we pick out significant joints in the world, to distinguish things from one another, are both found and projected. We can't tell which is which, without appealing to criteria, which may be projected. Thus, the appeal to first principles, to plug the gap between subject and object, is also a recognition of the void.

To reiterate the point in modern idiom, we see Descartes, in the opening passage of the *Second Meditations*, voice his uncertainty about the nature of the mind (or is it the body?), when he writes, 'Archimedes, that if he had one firm and immovable point, he could lift the world with a long enough lever; so, too, I can hope for great things if I can manage to find just one little thing that is solid and certain.' (Descartes 2007: p. 4). The very point in Modern Philosophy where Descartes instigates the quest to discover an axiomatic basis for a coherent system of first principles also introduces a sceptical gap between Subject and Object, where any and every first principle may be chimeric hubris. 'By furnishing the principle from which all being proceeds, the spokesman for first philosophy beats his breast as he who has everything in the bag,' responds Adorno. Yet this defetishising critique is also an essential part of first philosophy: the sceptical anxiety that drives the restless, productive dynamic of systematic scientific inquiry. The *telos* of first philosophy would be to speak of an ultimate nature, before its appearance to me, so whatever appears immediately must be mediated by critical understanding.

Husserl's defetishising critique of a *mathesis universalis*

It is interesting that it is at the end of his career, reflecting on the questions, motivations, historical conditions and epistemological concerns that guided his project of transcendental phenomenology, responding to bruising 'deconstructive' criticism of its a-historical idealism by his protégé, Heidegger (like Bertrand Russell, badgered by Ludwig Wittgenstein), Husserl, in *Crisis of the*

European Sciences, defends his work as a critique of positivist empiricism in contemporary philosophy – a defetishising critique of a Mathematical Universe. The mathematical essence of the universe is not, as it seems, the primary structure of primordial experience, but a projection, drawn from the cache of our pre-existing *lifeworld* of phenomenal significances. In defending his project against criticism of its idealistic tendency to first philosophy, note that Husserl calls attention to the intrinsic defetishising critique at work within it.

To recall, Husserl distinguishes between the relatively moderate scope of mathematical universalism in Ancient Universal Philosophy, and the radical scope of Modern universalism. The Ancient Greeks aimed for a systematically coherent, deductive theory, resting on fundamental concepts and principles, set out with pure rationality and apodictic argument. However, they sought such coherence only in fixed and limited systems, known *a priori*, univocally and intersubjectively. Husserl claims that Galileo's highly accurate calculations of causal correlations between things and qualities (such as length and pitch on a guitar string), using abstract mathematical formulae, that led to the thought that the entire unity of nature itself could be idealised in the axiomatic principles of a rational, all-inclusive science, to predict, manipulate and master the universe (Husserl 1970: p. 23). Pre-scientifically, we know, beyond subjective appearances, there is one original, unified world out there, following certain essential patterns, but it is Galileo who introduces the idea that we can use math to reveal this basic structure with a fixed system. It is he who saw that sense-qualities – 'plena' – which are not strict, direct analogues with the geometrical world of extended, measurable geometric shapes, nevertheless demonstrate some invariant causal relations with shapes. Thus, colours, warmth, weight, texture, experienced by gradation can be represented mathematically in virtue of correlations with the fixed, measured spatial domain (ibid. pp. 34–36).

Of this universal geometric skeleton underlying the contingent phenomena of subjective, historical experience, Husserl reminds us, Galileo's idea that everything must have a mathematical index was strange in his time (though it is easily taken for granted today's digital age). Our measurements have become ever more exact, precise and predictive, with the invention of improved technical means of verification. Ever more successful determinations of actual correlations of mathematical idealities with reality, allowing for prediction and manipulation, fosters the hubristic conflation of the 'successful application of these idealities to the intuitively given lifeworld' with 'discovery of the true being of nature itself' (ibid. p. 43). Husserl's defetishising critique of this mathematical universe poses a modest version of Adorno's derogatory comment, that the narcissistic spokesman of first philosophy beats his breast as though he has everything in the bag, unwittingly worshipping his own alienated and fetishised activity. Husserl cautions us not to forget that this mathematical *a priori* space – in which we 'discover' what is out there, in truth, in our minds, already – is a secondary *ideality*, an abstraction, projected into reality, out of the prior appearances of the lived-world experience of phenomenal, existential historical consciousness, mediated by our intentions, conventions and relations of power (ibid. p. 22).

The idealities of pure geometry that we project into the world of sense-experience are fetishised to the extent that we take them for granted as second nature, 'forgetting to see the difference between the real world of shapes and the actual shapes that we experience' (ibid. p. 25). Adorno later identifies such a misconception as 'identity thinking', the collapse of content into the concept, neglecting the remainder of reality left over and out. Husserl reminds us that we never encounter 'ideal' or 'pure' shapes out there, in the world, which such figures merely approximate. Nothing conforms to type (ibid. p. 25). We mistake for 'true being' what is actually a method for making predictions. But the *mathesis universalis* by which we impose meaning and order on the world also drains the world of meaning, in empty, formal generality that forgets the purpose and origin of its own thinking: the practical, subjectively mediated, lifeworld of everyday human significances (ibid. pp. 46–50). Galileo is thus both a 'discovering and concealing genius' (ibid. p. 52). This discovery and concealment, Husserl points out, are both party to the underlying partnership of first philosophy and defetishising critique, since it is only in relation to our ends, our concerns, that we wish to know the facts of nature, as it is, in itself.

Bracketing the 'natural attitude' of ordinary, common folk – which assumes naïvely that objects exist no matter whether and how we perceive them, and which asks of phenomena, 'what is this *really*?' (as if we can go beyond mere appearance, which is all we have *really*) – the phenomenologist attends to the world as it appears to us, asking, the manageable, *realistic* question, 'how do things appear to me?' But, to pre-empt Adorno, one may ask, is this not *too* realistic? Should we really ignore the annoying tug of conscience and taste, which asks if we're spoiling the scene, to bear witness and testify to the way *we* see the world, in the marvellously authentic terms of the common man (which common folk, with their natural attitude, would never dare express)? If scepticism can't be refuted, asks Husserl, and we can't establish a fixed link to the world, why not bracket this imperious theorising about the true nature of the objects of my inquiry, and refrain from objective judgments as to what a thing really is, since such judgment is inevitably subjective, to describe, modestly, how things appear to me? Again to pre-empt, first philosophy raises the problem of defetishising critique; arrogant pride reminds us of our febrile part in this world, without which things have no meaning; the glorious hubris of first philosophy lifts up our minds to behold the earth.

Why should we, mere mortals, dwell on mere mortal thoughts?

> A God's eye-view would necessarily make nonsense of our actual experience of things… an object that is, but is not and in principle could not be an object of consciousness, is pure non-sense… it is absurd to demand a description of something as it is from within, un-perceived (Husserl 2001: p. 57).

> Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent (Wittgenstein 1922: p. 90).

> A mortal must think mortal and not immortal thoughts (Adorno 1982: p. 3).

This mortalistic hectoring must stop. Who are these trenchant Germans instructing us to think for ourselves? Who gets left behind to take the blame? Don't rightly miss the gaze of a little God's eye-view of the world? Addressing Husserl's 'pure phenomenology' in the 'spirit of dialectic', Adorno begins his early analysis of phenomenology with the claim that it posits a 'sphere of absolute origins', 'safe from the spirit of contradiction in which the transcendental subject refers beyond itself'. This perspective, he complains, 'rediscovers itself in every entity without tolerating any restrictions', including the requirement to establish a fixed and ultimate limit to its own determinations. But, 'while thought submits to societal debt relations,' claiming this as its own, 'in a metaphysical illusion of being', he writes of phenomenology (also introducing his own philosophical project), that dialectic constantly brings this appearance back to nothing (Adorno 1982: pp. 3–4). First philosophy, at least, brings its defetishising critique to bear upon itself, whereas phenomenology, satisfied with present phenomena, imposes no such metaphysical restrictions on itself, and therefore risks nothing. Such apparent hedonism would be tolerable if it weren't for the covert limits thereby transmitted – the real underlying structures of domination we inherit and ought never to let rest in smug appearance.

Husserl appealed to the 'Cartesian illusion about the absolute foundation of philosophy', aiming to revive first philosophy through 'a spirit divested of all entity', a discipline that reduces all concepts to the thinking subject and what it supplies to experience (ibid.). Of course, Husserl eschews first philosophy by bracketing its question, but he also consciously associates his project of phenomenology with the foundation of modern philosophy, setting it in the secure stable of subjective self-certainty. But Method, Adorno objects, *must* violate matter. Plato at least recognised Truth, Unity and Being as *pure determinations of thought*. Philosophy has 'ever more ingeniously hidden that break without ever coming to master it.' Though the problem of method's violating character is also a condition for phenomenology, it cannot tolerate it and, thus, it's 'inclusiveness *is* the break.' With 'fanatical tolerance against arbitrariness', its 'subjectivity sets up the law of objectivity' (ibid. pp. 12–13), wanting 'the advantages of a system, without the penalty': 'to be first

philosophy without taking on the impossible task of deducing itself from a first principle.' Thus, Adorno finishes: 'rooted in arbitrariness,' the phenomenological ontology, which Husserl begins, 'sacrifices rationality and critique of the system for immediacy… in harmony with the darkness of immediate lordship' (ibid. p. 33). It 'feigns the incarnate presence of the first which is neither incarnate nor present, resembling the bureaucratic world which rests on nothing but the fact of bureaucracy itself, enthroning sheer organisation, regardless of its social content' (ibid. p. 34).

While Adorno shares Husserl's worries about the mathematisation of nature, and while he also eschews first philosophy (though from a dialectical perspective of relentless critical mediation), he carries nostalgia and respect for the eminently *accountable* bourgeois values his mind was made to fit. 'Epistemology is *true* as long as it accounts for the impossibility of its own beginning and lets itself be driven at every turn by its *inadequacy* to the things themselves,' he writes, criticising the call of phenomenology for our attention 'back to the things themselves'. Epistemology is at least *untrue* according to its own measure of scientificity (ibid. p. 25). Though both he and Husserl are critical of epistemology, Adorno thinks 'criticising epistemology also means retaining it, confronting it with its claim to being absolute… [since] its claim to universality means that it must try to retain universality' (ibid. p. 27). This early theme of Adorno's is repeated in his nostalgia for bourgeois ideals, the open targets of classical Marxist immanent critique, which – like the last tragic president, Richard Nixon – at least reflected upon a gap between norms and acts, or recorded facts, without simply affirming the status quo.

Despite his admiration for the explicit object of *Against Epistemology*, if not for its implicit object, phenomenology, Adorno maintains, '[i]t is time not for first philosophy, but last philosophy' (ibid. p. 40), just as he urges, in the opening passage, '[a] mortal must think mortal and not immortal thoughts' (ibid. p. 3). Adorno's critique of phenomenology is ultimately a critique of the epistemological heritage it unwittingly drags with it, in its merely *abstract* negation of epistemology (a self-deceptive act of 'bracketing' that is conspicuously absent from any of the authentic scenes it lays bare – a large, intrusive sound boom the professional phenomenological actor has learned to ignore, which distracts only naïve newcomers to the studio audience). Though I'm largely in sympathy with this tentative thesis of Adorno's, it is with his assault on Heidegger's ontology at the end of his career, after Nazism, war and ominous exile in the USA, that its limitations come to the fore, with *Negative Dialectics*. Again, Adorno takes a swipe at poor old epistemology, but this time his criticism of phenomenological ontology is more dismissive (as he ontologises his own negative spiral with tired repetition): 'Immutability of truth is the delusion of *prima philosophia*. The invariants are not identically resolved in the dynamics of history and of consciousness, but they are moments in that dynamics; stabilized as transcendence, they become ideology. Ideology… lies in the implicit identity of concept and thing, an identity justified by the world even when a doctrine summarily teaches us that consciousness depends on being' (Adorno 1973: p. 40). Does this 'negative dialectics' not a little all-too-*consistently* refuse the identity of concept and object?

The syncopated off-beat is a liberating inclination, but the relentless drum-and-bass critique of identity thinking becomes something of a fetish of cathexis for the old man, substituting for the original authentic critical impetus. Adorno complains that ontology became an ideological screen 'for society's objective functional context' and 'a palliative for the subject's suffering under society' (ibid. p. 66). He complains that 'faith in Being… degenerates into bondage to Being,' such that, 'defeatism paralyses the specifically philosophical impulse to blast a hidden truth out from beneath the idols of conventional consciousness.' (ibid. p. 72). 'Today, as in Kant's time, philosophy demands a rational critique of reason, not its banishment… When men are forbidden to think, their thinking sanctions what simply exists.' (ibid. p. 85). This potentially liberating critique is betrayed by the insistent litigation of a *bilderverbot* against the immortal thoughts and low art of the simple pilgrim. Adorno writes of Heidegger that, 'a thought fascinated by the chimera that anything is absolutely "first" will eventually claim that even this irreducible thing itself is the "last"', so that non-identity is suppressed in identity, 'like a skeleton in the family closet' (ibid. p. 104). But can't we defy history to define ourselves strategically? Better to die trying than to survive on a diet of unmitigated negation. Enter Zarathustra, and the sublime ideology that 'lies in wait for the mind which delights in itself' (ibid. p. 30).

Preposterous wisdom: with the true world we have also abolished the apparent one

In finding his way out of disillusioned nihilism, it is Nietzsche's critique of Platonic Form (lightning behind the striking) that reveals to him how writing has generated the illusion that we are not of this world, as if we don't belong in it, half-man and half-beast that it makes us seem to be. The curse of writing is that it fosters reified fetishes and petrified abstractions, divorced from the practical contexts from which they arise and to which they attempt to respond, generating misguided, self-defeating beliefs in abstract entities that become drained of physical content. Nietzsche rejects the illusion of decontextualised Form but he does not collapse the Subject into the predicate of history with mediocre functionalism. He thinks we should proceed with Purpose in an ocean of functions. His rejection of the Subject behind the predicate is not an endorsement of the reality of appearances. We cannot know that 'this is mere appearance'. The notion of 'appearance', he notes in *TI*, is itself an ideal construct by which filter out the terrible reality we actually experience, a crutch, like a cell phone or a cigarette. We would not, thinks Nietzsche, in sympathy with Latour and Adorno, have been so harsh on our ideals, if we could feel what we feel now, when they're gone. A vial of scepticism is necessary for the sake of philosophical advancement, but as an end in itself, it is taken, following Socrates, in suicide. Spears that wound may also heal, but, spears were not constructed for this secondary purpose.

There is no independent criterion between Appearance and Reality to distinguish the two. Reality appears to be laden with values and we project, as a matter of concern, but it also appears to be indifferent to our plight and unconcerned with human values, as a matter of fact. Adorno suffers from *apophasis* (a defetishising critique of idolatry) a void, that is unchecked by the habituated icons, rituals and ceremonies of accompanying *kataphasis*. He seeks pure, unadulterated Morality, uncompromised by our sordid human concepts, degraded by Auschwitz. But brutally consistent negativity is exhausting. Nietzsche, by contrast, finds his place among necessary illusions. In a brief, neat genealogy of epistemology, in *TI*, 'How the true world finally became a fable: history of an error', he recounts a consecutive series of philosophical positions on the status of the 'real world', as opposed to the 'apparent one' we *apparently* experience in everyday life. First, the real world was reserved for the wise man (Plato), then for the virtuous man (Aquinas); then it became an unattainable consolation (Kant), and then, in Nietzsche's final stage, we realise '[t]he real world – we have done away with it: what world is left? The apparent one, perhaps? No! With the real world we have also done away with the apparent one! (Noon; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest hour; pinnacle of humanity; INCIPT ZARATHUSTRA)'. He is a bit over the top, Nietzsche. He lays it on thick but you get the idea. Nietzsche rejects truth no-matter-what but he also recognises that the real world outstrips our concerns and that our concerns extend to the world. We are, after all, part of the world. Phenomenological hypostatisation and acceptance of appearances fails to confront the world *beyond our concern,* from whence our concerns are derived*,* into which they are not merely projected.

Phenomenology as first philosophy

Does first philosophy bring us back down to earth? Perhaps, as you read this contribution, the less it seems so. It would be in order for me to state my conclusion unambiguously and sum up my case, in clear, direct terms. I have argued, drawing on Latour, that defetishising critique, which offers social explanations for supposedly objective facts, is self-defeating without the constructive dynamic of first philosophy, which risks an impossible hypothesis, to be tested against reality, to see where it gets us. Such hypotheses are seldom *mere* projections, as Latour points out, quoting Whitehead's observation, that, 'for natural philosophy, everything perceived is in nature' (Latour 2004: p. 244), and stating, to repeat, that 'even the so-called weak objects were never mere projections on an empty screen' (ibid. p. 242). On the other hand, we must also be careful not to conflate appearances with unmediated reality. I do not follow Levinas, in setting out ethics discretely as first philosophy, but it is important to note that matters of concern bear ethical implications. In this respect, Adorno's ethical concern suffices, to remind us that everything about the normative status quo so far is compromised by pervasive domination.

The self-defeatism of defetishising critique, decried by Latour, and the hubris of first philosophy, decried in a series of defetishising critiques by Husserl (of a *mathesis universalis*) and by Adorno (of Husserl's covert first philosophical foundationalism) – both of these tropes belong to a single dynamic that is broken when broken apart. Latour is right to draw attention beyond matters of fact to matters of concern but you should be wary of dropping altogether all sneaking reservations you have about concerns, as opposed to facts. Phenomenology, as Latour writes, may *betray* the living reality of empirical matter, by merely colouring in the rich red glow of the sunset on the picture of supposedly boring electric waves, but without the dreaded 'bifurcation' this grasps, between us and the outside world, how could I discern matters of concern? Moreover, whose beliefs must I accept, in this dangerous space 'beyond iconoclasm' (ibid. p. 248)? I argue, against both parties, that first philosophy has its rightful place beside defetishising critique. Where phenomenology recognises this, it helps scientists, with its rich descriptions, to interrogate the dark reality that lies beyond phenomenal appearances. Although Being is unconcerned about our existence, we definitely need to be concerned with Being and how we understand reality. Nietzsche found our knowledge and ideas of the world to be illusory but he did not feel that it is impossible to know the real world, that is, to use these illusions to get to grips with the real world.

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