

# Phenomenology and Metaphysical Realism<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article examines the relationship between totalitarianism and the metaphysical illusions on which it rests. Phenomenological investigation is claimed to loosen the grip of totalitarian ideology by exposing its origins in the “resurrective” illusions that seek to overcome the impact of collective trauma. Phenomenology is thus shown to have emancipatory power.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, metaphysical illusion, resurrective ideology, Manichaeism, collective trauma, finitude, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricoeur

"Philosophical pleading for subjectivity is becoming the citizen's only recourse against the tyrant."--Paul Ricoeur, 1977, p. 155

This essay extends an earlier article co-written with George Atwood (Stolorow & Atwood, 2017) in which we joined Wilhelm Dilthey’s conception of the metaphysical impulse as a flight from the tragedy of human finitude with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s understanding of how language bewitches intelligence. We contended that there are features of the phenomenology of language identified by Wittgenstein—in particular, the projection of reified pictures as the meaning of words—that play a constitutive and pervasive role in the creation of metaphysical illusion. Unlike Dilthey, who largely

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reserved the metaphysical impulse to abstract philosophical systems, we extended it to everyday life as well. And unlike Wittgenstein, who believed that the bewitchment of intelligence by language could be overcome by good philosophizing, we argued that such bewitchment is an indelible feature of the never-ending struggle against the traumatizing impact of finitude.

Our account of the genesis of metaphysical illusion provides a means of unpacking the claim by Ricoeur with which the present essay begins. Typically, tyranny is supported by some form of totalitarian ideology, and totalitarian ideology, in turn, is ordinarily rooted in a framework of metaphysical illusion or what is oxymoronically characterized as *metaphysical realism*.

In her study of totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt (1951) provided a cogent analysis of the essence of political ideology. Such “isms,” she said, claim to explain all historical happenings by deducing them from a single self-evident idea or premise—for example, that history “progresses” through the elimination of inferior races (Nazism) or decadent classes (communism). Once established, these ironclad logical systems become, like paranoid delusions, immune to the impact of actual experience. Further, they readily devolve into systems of genocidal terror, as they give warrant to the unbridled liquidation of anyone or anything believed to impede the historical process.

An all-too-common form of totalitarian ideology is found in the rhetoric of evil. The seeds of the rhetoric of evil can be found in the ancient religious ideology, originating in Persia and pervasive in contemporary religious fundamentalism, known as *Manichaeism*—the idea that the movement of history is explained by an

eternal struggle between the metaphysical forces of good and of evil. In the rhetoric of evil, Manichaeism is harnessed for political purposes—one's own group is claimed to embody the forces of good, and the opposing group, the forces of evil. Through such attributions, which are inherently nationalistic or ethnocentric, one's political aims are justified as being in the service of the good.

What Ricoeur calls *philosophical pleading for subjectivity* I want to call *phenomenology*. As Atwood and I have shown (Stolorow & Atwood, 2017), the phenomenological study of language can be effective in deconstructing metaphysical illusions, including those that support totalitarian ideologies. Heidegger (1927/1962), for example, carries out his phenomenological investigation of the meaning of Being in conjunction with a “destruction” (p. 44) of traditional ontological concepts in which Being is regarded as some sort of metaphysical entity.

As distinct from a metaphysical essence that inheres in entities themselves, Heidegger conceives of the Being of entities in terms of how they are intelligible or understandable *to us* as the entities they are. The Being of entities thus depends on human understanding—the “clearing” that lights up their intelligibility. Heidegger argues that because an unarticulated, pre-philosophical understanding of our own Being is constitutive of our kind of Being, we humans can investigate our own kind of Being by investigating our understanding (and lack of understanding) of that Being. Accordingly, it follows that his investigative method is to be a phenomenological one, aimed at *illuminating the fundamental structures of our understanding of our Being: “Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible”* (p. 60). In this formulation, the positing of

metaphysical entities and essences gives way to a phenomenological investigation and illumination of how entities, including especially we ourselves, are intelligible.

Soon after the publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger turned his attention from the Being of entities to *Being as such*, a phrase that seems to point in a metaphysical direction. Indeed, inspired by the poet Holderlin as his guide to a spiritual awakening, he characterizes Being as such as a divine force or energy, “sent” to the properly receptive human being (Heidegger 1968/1972). In recent years a debate has been taking place among members of the Heidegger Circle as to whether the later Heidegger remained dedicated to phenomenological inquiry or turned instead to a form of metaphysical realism. The crux of the debate concerns the question of whether Being as such remains dependent on the human being (phenomenology) or is independent of the human beings who experience it (metaphysical realism). Over the years proponents of both sides of the debate have marshaled plausible support from Heidegger’s original texts. Perhaps we can conclude that this debate reflects a conflict within Heidegger himself over these two opposing conceptions, a conflict rooted in his own experiential world.

There is one context, however, in which Heidegger’s pivot toward metaphysical realism is undeniable—namely, his embrace of Nazi ideology. Heidegger’s version of Nazism reflected his own dream of Being, whereby he seemed to experience the Nazi takeover of Germany as an upsurge of Being itself bursting forth in historical reality. He envisioned a “second beginning” in the history of Being (the first occurring in ancient Greece) in which he himself would be a spiritual leader.

Returning to the claim made by Ricoeur, how can phenomenology help emancipate people from such metaphysical illusions? In a chapter co-written with George Atwood

and Donna Orange (in Stolorow, 2011, chapter 9), we argued that for Heidegger Nazism was an example of what we called *resurrective ideology*, which served to restore a sense of agentic selfhood dismantled by a series of devastating traumatic occurrences. A similar restorative purpose can be served on a socio-political scale by destructive ideologies that take form in the wake of collective trauma—witness, for example, the rise of Manichean rhetoric in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (Stolorow, 2009). How can phenomenological inquiry loosen the grip of such restorative ideological illusions? It can do so by helping people understand and dwell in the traumas—individual or collective—that underpin them, thereby providing the emotional devastation with a dialogical home in which it can be held and better borne (Stolorow, 2016), rendering the evasive resurrective ideological illusions less necessary. If, as Braver (2012) quips, “Phenomenology lets metaphysicians heal themselves” (p. 31), perhaps it can do something similar for ideologues.

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