

Written for Me and No One Else: The Humanities without Humanism

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*Draft only*

This paper develops a distinctively phenomenological approach to the study of art and history, that is, to research and teaching in the humanities. I begin by deriving a definition of “humanism” from recent discussions of the so-called “crisis” of the humanities. Specifically, I define humanism in terms of what I call “disciplinary sociology” and “methodological theism.” Drawing on Edmund Husserl and Hans-Georg Gadamer, I pose transcendental phenomenology’s method of reduction and commitment to methodological atheism as an alternative to humanism. Finally, I give a reading of Petrarch’s *The Ascent of Mount Ventoux* to demonstrate concretely why transcendental phenomenology provides a better account of the humanities than humanism.

In the 2006 movie *The Devil Wears Prada*, Meryl Streep's Miranda Priestly delivers a withering rejoinder to an underling during a fashion magazine editorial meeting: "Florals? For spring? Groundbreaking." One is tempted to adopt this world-weary tone in response to debates about the fate of the humanities. Declining enrollments, department closures, vanishing academic jobs, budget cuts, a zeitgeist indifferent or hostile to historical knowledge, "wokeness" and other ideologies on the rise—to all such reports, one may well reply: "A crisis? Of the humanities? Groundbreaking." The aim of this paper is not to break any ground concerning the "crisis" of the humanities, that is, the threatened contemporary situation of the study of art, history, and philosophy. Yet it seems to me that there remains an untapped resource in this wide-ranging debate. In one of the *Crisis* manuscripts, Edmund Husserl proposes "to carry out, in the form of historical meditations, self-reflections about our own present philosophical situation in the hope that in this way we can finally take possession of the meaning, method, and beginning of philosophy" (Husserl 1970: 353-354). If the humanities are in crisis, then it stands to reason that a fruitful perspective for addressing this situation would be a "philosophy of crisis," namely, phenomenology (Knies 2021: 1-2). In response to our forgetfulness of how transcendental consciousness constitutes experience, the phenomenologist seeks to "reawaken" our awareness of self-given and first-person evidence (Husserl 1970: 359). "Meaning," or taking something "as" something, precedes and enables all knowing and doing. From the perspective of the phenomenological method initiated by Husserl, this paper responds to the crisis of the humanities. I propose that transcendental phenomenology furnishes a descriptively apt account of the humanities that could improve how those fields are conceptualized and practiced.

Sociological and disciplinary treatments of the humanities, proceeding from anthropological accounts of the "human being," dominate discussion of the crisis. Here, I refer to

these third-person conceptions of the study of the humanities and the rigidified definitions of human nature on which they rely as “humanism.” My aim, by contrast, is to provide an account of *the humanities without humanism*.<sup>1</sup> Put another way, I will argue that the humanities are enabled by a transcendently reduced conception of the first-person standpoint, which brackets fixed definitions of the human being in favor of a prior openness to the claims of a text.

To make this case, I will, first, examine some recent literature on the crisis of the humanities, with an emphasis on what I call its humanism and the corresponding space for a phenomenological contribution. Next, I will turn to Husserl’s method and its legacy in philosophical hermeneutics to provide an account of the phenomenological “reduction” and “methodological atheism” as beneficial to humanistic study. Finally, I will provide a case study of the “event” of the humanities from Petrarch that affirms and exemplifies these phenomenological insights. Although my conclusions may hardly be groundbreaking, we might thereby “finally take possession of the meaning, method, and beginning of” the humanities.

### §1. The crisis of humanism

The recent “effective history” of the crisis of the humanities reveals two assumptions concerning the character and definition of humanistic study commonly held in this debate. I call these assumptions *disciplinary sociology* and *methodological theism*. Taken together, these premises form what I am terming “humanism.” Examining these twin features of humanism will permit me to introduce my phenomenological response to the crisis of the humanities.

Two treatments of the crisis, one broadly *critical* and the other *in defense* of the humanities, articulate the framework of *disciplinary sociology*. By disciplinary sociology, I mean definitions of the humanities which emphasize their place in the university and defend a

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this phrase from Adler 2021, although I am appropriating it as positive.

concomitant ideal of scholarly knowledge as their goal. In an erudite and incisive study, Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon investigate nineteenth-century German academic culture as the birthplace of what they call the “modern humanities,” which is their translation for the *Geisteswissenschaften* (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 116). Reitter and Wellmon convincingly demonstrate that the modern humanities, since the age of Wilhelm Dilthey, have maintained a remarkably consistent self-conception as in “crisis,” that is, on the verge of extinction in a hostile culture. It is this image of crisis that Reitter and Wellmon deconstruct. Against the alienations of science, technology, and secularization (what Max Weber terms “disenchantment”), the humanities have adopted a “defensive” posture that retrieves or enables “some lost or future harmony and wholeness” (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 21, 196, 6). The humanities position themselves as a bastion for morals and values, filling a lacuna in the modern university left by the appreciable achievements but corresponding normative and spiritual disappointments of natural science (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 115, 140, 224, 261). Reitter and Wellmon’s critique of the modern humanities is that they “overpromise” within this milieu by offering the “transformation” of “life” and the articulation of “meaning,” goals that are tantalizing but imprecise and incapable of realization (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 79, 97, 249). The impossible dream of humanistic redemption perpetuates the crisis that gives the humanities their *raison d’être* but induces their fundamental anxiety.

For Reitter and Wellmon, the humanities should abandon the self-image of crisis because its dangerously underdetermined aims threaten the scholarly mission of the humanities, namely, “disciplinary, university-based scholarship” (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 115). The essential contradiction at the heart of the modern humanities is that they historically emerge from the birth of university scholarship, which they correspondingly disavow in the name of spiritual

regeneration (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 52, 260). The humanities incoherently purport to reject the intellectual values and cultural norms to which they owe their existence. Instead of responding to a vague and self-perpetuating spiritual crisis of meaning that in principle can never be resolved, Reitter and Wellmon argue that the humanities should hold fast to their originating *wissenschaftliche* ideals of empirical accuracy, responsible comprehensiveness, and disinterested contemplation (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 245-249).

By foregrounding scholarly standards, Reitter and Wellmon contribute to the disciplinary sociology of the humanities. That this perspective is so pervasive is indicated by how normatively flexible it is. Another author also engages in disciplinary sociology but with the avowed aim, not shared by Reitter and Wellmon's deconstructive and historicist take, of vindicating the cognitive achievements of the humanities. Chris Haufe's monograph intervenes in the "epistemology of the humanities" from the point of view of post-empiricist Kuhnian philosophy of science (Haufe 2023: 232, 67). Haufe situates the humanities on a spectrum alongside the sciences. The humanities and sciences amount to "somewhat disparate instances of a single phenomenon—*disciplinary knowledge*—rather than parallel universes of intellectual pursuit" (Haufe 2023: 48). Drawing on a wide variety of historical and contemporary humanistic research, Haufe argues that the humanities "produce disciplinary knowledge of human experience" (Haufe 2023: 15). A central feature of Haufe's disciplinary sociology is his explanation of "canonical" humanistic texts, which he argues inculcate a "language of scholarly thought" and "general intellectual style" in much the same way that scholarly artifacts and practices do in the sciences (Haufe 2023: 49).

For Haufe, enculturation into norms of scholarship and intellectual practice is unrelated to truth: "canonical texts...are *not* valued primarily for their truth content" (Haufe 2023: 47, 68).

When I read Dante's *Inferno*, according to Haufe, I do so to appreciate Dante's literary style, familiarize myself with his contributions to the tradition, and share a lodestar with other disciplinary practitioners but certainly not to learn true facts about the geography of Hell or the ranking of sins.<sup>2</sup> As I will argue later, however, studying the humanities involves texts meaningfully addressing the reader in ways that cannot be captured by objectified accounts of disciplinary practice. Experiences of meaning involve first-person cognitive achievements. Haufe's impoverished conception of first-person experience is further exposed when he claims that "current research in the humanities seems to have little effect on *anyone*" (Haufe 2023: 231). By this, Haufe means that humanistic research is infrequently read or cited. But this analysis reduces "effects" to external sociological facts and thereby ignores how studying the humanities can effect transformative experiences, enriched self-understanding, improved outlooks on the world, and so on. Haufe's sociological definitions of "truth content" and "effect" conceptualize humanistic study in terms of *third-person features* of disciplinary practice.

In a similar gesture, Reitter and Wellmon's genealogy concludes that the modern humanities are an "invention" (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 112, 224, 241). They mean thereby to argue that the humanities are not timeless activities but rather the outgrowth of historical achievements of university culture. With their sociological account of the humanistic disciplines as background, Reitter and Wellmon conclude that the modern humanities, far from validating the "meaning" of "life," achieve little more than "the moral consolation and unity of educated professionals" (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 151). Reitter and Wellmon's objectifying historicism debunks the purportedly unrealistic self-image of the humanities. Like Haufe's sociological emphasis on the "scientific" character of the humanities, Reitter and Wellmon are unable to grasp

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<sup>2</sup> Haufe refers to Dante in these terms; I have adapted and expanded his example (Haufe 2023: 49).

how humanistic study enables first-person experiences of meaning that are irreducible to and more fundamental than self-deluded “consolation.” Indeed, no external sociological or historical facts about the humanities as disciplinary practices can account for first-person experiences of meaning which constitute humanistic study.

Despite their divergent perspectives and methods—one critical of the humanities through historicism, the other validating via philosophy of science—Reitter and Wellmon and Haufe share fundamental analytical assumptions because they practice disciplinary sociology. They also point toward the second feature of humanism in my sense of the term. For Reitter and Wellmon, the modern humanities respond to the crisis that engulfs them by retrieving a fixed “human essence” that modern alienation threatens to erase (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 16). And Haufe argues that, just as the sciences develop disciplinary practices for describing features of the natural world, the humanities do the same in the service of “getting at the essence of some aspect of human experience” (Haufe 2023: 130). That the humanities are animated by the “essence” of “human” nature is what I call *methodological theism*. I borrow this term from Steven Crowell, who defines it as “any appeal to authoritative entities or sciences” (Crowell 2022: 46). In the present context, methodological theism refers to metaphysically and anthropologically substantive assumptions in the humanities.

Like disciplinary sociology, methodological theism recurs in a variety of forms across the debate. This position often forms the centerpiece of defenses of the humanities. Jeffrey Hart, for example, argues for a conservative conception of “Western” culture in terms of a “great narrative” of major texts centered around the dialectic of “Athens” (knowledge) and “Jerusalem” (faith) (Hart 2001: 73, xi). Hart employs this Great Books curriculum to shape “a person who can

recreate Western civilization” amid modernity’s “cultural catastrophe” (Hart 2001: 244). *Bildung* redeems a right-wing account of cultural decline.

Hart’s characterization of this “great narrative” underscores its methodological theism. Tradition consists of works of art and literature that are “absolutely permanent things” (Hart 2001: 13). The *agon* between Athens and Jerusalem is a “permanent dialectical form” distinctive of “the Western mind” (Hart 2001: 126). Students confront “a strong and lasting consensus” articulated in “absolutely fundamental” texts which have “enjoyed such classic status for centuries” (Hart 2001: 11). To read a Platonic dialogue, for example, is to discover a “permanent possibility” for thinking (Hart 2001: 168). Hart defines culture in terms of its rigidity, that is, its perennial lastingness through aesthetic excellence and conceptual structures. What makes Hart’s account methodologically theistic is that the ground for these claims to “permanence” is presupposed and never shown. He tells students that the Hebrew Bible, for instance, is “a complete religious experience” (Hart 2001: 101). That thesis is *declared* (third person) rather than *revealed* in a dialogical encounter with the text (first person).<sup>3</sup> From the outset of his account, Hart makes assumptions about the nature of cultural objects. These *metaphysical* premises (“permanent,” “complete”) imply *methodological* provisions for conducting research (with reverence and deference to the classics’ inherent excellence). Such disciplinary assumptions are licensed by objectified and external definitions of humanistic study.

Hart never takes a stand on the dialectical contest of Athens and Jerusalem. The *Liberating Arts* project for traditional liberal arts education within and outside the university, meanwhile, takes Christianity as its point of departure (Bilbro, Hooten Wilson, and Henreckson 2023). This account includes a commitment to methodological theism that overlaps with Hart’s

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<sup>3</sup> On the phenomenological difference between a “canon” and a “classic,” see Crowell 2015: 249-253.



despite other metaphysical disagreements. In response to the crisis of the humanities across higher education, Joseph Clair proposes Christian humanism as the sublation of the “liberal” emphasis on humanistic truth and the “progressive” focus on social justice (Clair 2023: 64-66). In their quest for neutral objectivity, liberals cannot ground “meaning” while progressives are blind to the element of “redemption” in human life (Clair 2023: 68-69, 72). What the liberal arts need today is neither “Truth” nor “Justice” but rather “Jesus,” that is, the Christian humanist view of “love” as the “telos” of the human person that grounds an integrated account of “human flourishing,” inquiry into truth, and a theory of meaning in life (Clair 2023: 73, 66). Theological premises here provide the ground for the definition and value of the humanities. Lest Clair’s Christian humanism seem outside the mainstream of the contemporary debate, only his particular theological commitments are not held by every commentator considered here. Reitter and Wellmon, Haufe, Hart, and Clair all adhere to variations on methodological theism in that they conceptualize the humanities as grounded in or relying on implicit, fixed, or objective definitions of the “human being.”

Methodological theism finds support in disciplinary sociology to the extent that a human essence provides the object of study for academic disciplines, which in turn explicate, clarify, revive, and defend “human nature” in its various dimensions. Disciplinary sociology and methodological theism form a complementary whole, namely, humanism in my sense as a characterization of the study of the humanities. What unifies and defines humanism is its *third-person character*, that is, its objectifying or external definitions of disciplinary activity and of the “human being” that overlook or claim to precede any account of first-person experience.

## §2. Husserl and Gadamer on phenomenology against humanism

According to humanism, the humanities function as disciplinary practices oriented toward objective or external facts about human existence. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and its legacy in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics furnish the tools to criticize disciplinary sociology and methodological theism, thereby bringing *the humanities without humanism* into view. How does phenomenology permit the pursuit of this goal? Husserl's transcendental phenomenology enacts a methodological "shift in focus" from first-order claims about entities (or how "the world is there for us") to second-order inquiry into (or "*reflection*" on) the meaning of entities (their "*absolute being*" in consciousness) (Husserl 2014: 104, 91; see also Crowell 2019: 329-330). Phenomenology takes this meaningfully structured "intentional" space as its domain of investigation. Its inquiry reflects solely on how entities are taken "as" something (their meaning) and excludes third-person metaphysical speculation as well as scientific positing of "facts" about what entities are like independent of a meaningful "correlation." This decision entails that phenomenology takes its point of departure from the transcendently understood first-person point of view in which meaning is at issue for an "I" which is experiencing things without relying on other premises or assumptions. These two themes, the "shift in focus" of phenomenology's distinctive method of *reduction* and the "self-responsibility" or *methodological atheism* implied in the first-person perspective, will focus my presentation of transcendental phenomenology as a response to humanism.

Husserl imparts to phenomenology its special method when he introduces the procedure of *reduction*.<sup>4</sup> Above all, the phenomenologist aims to reflect only on how things appear in her first-person experience. This goal implies pure description as the norm of phenomenological

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<sup>4</sup> I will not here enter into the intricacies of Husserl's different versions of reduction (eidetic, psychological, transcendental, etc.).

philosophy. Phenomenology may “*lay claim to nothing other than what we are essentially able to make transparently evident in consciousness itself*” (Husserl 2014: 109). That is, the phenomenologist describes or reflects on what is present or apparent to her, which makes self-given and first-person *Evidenz* the paramount standard of philosophical inquiry. This norm in turn implies a negative prescription against privileging other standards or methods that would impose external terms or concepts onto description. By focusing solely on what is given, the phenomenologist is forced to set aside anything outside consciousness.

Two methodological implications follow from the exclusive focus on self-given evidence. First, phenomenology attains “the realm of transcendental consciousness” as its object domain, which precedes and makes possible any theorization or speculation (Husserl 2014: 136). I will explore this claim shortly. The second methodological implication refers to the “suspension” or “bracketing” of third-person sciences in the so-called “epoché.” The phenomenologist puts “*out of action*” the authority of all such discourses (Husserl 2014: 55). That is, while phenomenologizing, she rigorously and constantly suspends judgment about them. But this suspension is performed *not* in order to doubt or ignore third-person claims but rather to treat them as phenomena, that is, as given aspects of experience that appear and whose status is at issue. Put another way, bracketing thematizes the experiences that take place in a science, now understood not as *first-order* “facts” which must be accepted or rejected on their own terms but as *second-order* meaningful phenomena that can be described, clarified, and scrutinized:

Everything transcendent, insofar as it is given a way that conforms to consciousness, is an object of phenomenological investigation, not only from the side of the *consciousness* of it (for example, the various manners of consciousness in which it is given as the same) but also, albeit essentially interwoven with that,

as something given and taken up in those givennesses. (Husserl: 2014: 137; see also Romano 2015: xiv)

Equipped with the reduction, phenomenology is a universal research program. The philosopher performing the reduction suspends all sciences and is thereby enabled to treat their claims as objects of consciousness and as bracketed or “given” correlates of conscious experience.

Phenomenological reduction moves from external facts, or third-person statements, to given meaning, or first-person taking of something “as” something. This method entails a new stance toward other sciences and discourses. Although this fact has not been as frequently emphasized as with reference to the natural sciences, the reduction applies to “humanistic sciences” other than psychology (Husserl 1970: 321).<sup>5</sup> Seeing how transcendental phenomenology treats the humanities will concretize these methodological points. The phenomenologist shifts “from real human beings back to their ‘manners of givenness,’ their manners of ‘appearing’” (Husserl 1970: 183). The phenomenologist does not take the statements of the historian or literary critic as first-order claims about “humanity” that can be treated as true or false according to the standards of a discipline nor does she take items of humanistic study as reflecting or expressing a “human” nature or anthropology. To this extent, the phenomenological reduction is opposed to the third-person standards of disciplinary sociology. The discourses of the humanities should be treated as phenomena that appear in the phenomenologist’s first-person experience of studying history and art. Because the phenomenologist practices “the reduction of

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<sup>5</sup> According to Hannah Arendt, Husserl’s phenomenology gives “a new intellectual foundation for humanism” by restoring the “classicist” ideal of “man’s sense of being at home in the world” (Arendt 1994: 165). Similarly, Gianni Vattimo calls Husserl a “humanist” who aims at recovering the *humanitas* of the “subject” against scientific objectification and technological alienation (Vattimo 1988: 34-35). These characterizations are inconsistent with a properly phenomenological account of humanism. In their otherwise exhaustive account of the crisis discourse among German academics, Reitter and Wellmon do not mention Husserl’s *Crisis*; in one footnote, they cite his “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” essay (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 301n98). I aim to show that Husserl is central to understanding the crisis of humanism.

mankind to the phenomenon ‘mankind,’ which is included as part of the reduction of the world,” she can “recognize mankind as a self-objectification of transcendental subjectivity,” that is, as an accomplishment prior to any anthropological definition of “human nature” (Husserl 1970: 153). The statements or objects of the humanities, such as narratives about the past or artworks, are bracketed and treated as given phenomena open to description. The phenomenologist grasps her role in constituting the experience and corresponding *meaning* at issue in studying the past and art because she has transcendently reduced them to phenomena and suspended scientific judgments regarding their *existence*.

The responsibility of the phenomenologist for the “constitution” of her experience points toward the next feature of transcendental phenomenology relevant here, namely, what Crowell calls “methodological atheism” (Crowell 2022). *Methodological atheism* refers to Husserl’s resolution to “tolerate no presuppositions, no basic sphere of beings beneath itself of which no one knows, which no one interrogates scientifically, which no one has mastered in a knowing way” (Husserl 1970: 112). This mission follows from the thematization of the transcendently understood first-person point of view, in which I describe what appears and perform a reduction on all other discourses. Maintaining this “pure” or transcendental sphere as my domain of investigation means I cannot take for granted entities, methods, or disciplines outside what I can describe within the terms of my experience. The methodological atheist assumes nothing from the outset of her inquiry and endeavors only to describe her experience. We are not dealing here with a metaphysically problematic solipsism or procedurally naïve scientism, however. Transcendental phenomenology, focusing on “modes of validity” rather than existence claims, maintains a stance of *neutrality* toward metaphysical questions (Husserl 1970: 166). Furthermore, as *methodological*, methodological atheism is by definition artificially induced but

for a justifiable reason, namely, to minimize the influence of distorting or inherited presuppositions that would provide philosophy with some “ground of things taken for granted and ready in advance” (Husserl 1970: 181). Without such an unexamined presupposition or assumed ground, the phenomenologist remains a perpetual beginner, always returning to and freshly interrogating the most basic terms and assumptions of philosophy. Full self-transparency and a pure starting point may be empirical impossibilities, but the methodological atheist continually strives for a state with “no unasked question, nothing taken for granted that is not understood” (Husserl 1970: 265; see also Knies 2021: 108). Methodological atheism refers, then, not to the actual fulfillment of full presuppositionlessness but rather to the ongoing attempt to achieve it by remaining neutral on all “questions of fact (first-order ‘existence’ questions, including metaphysical ones)” (Crowell 2022: 46; see also Yoshimi 2015: 6-9). By refusing to “invoke” entities or recognize the authority of first-order sciences, the methodological atheist remains faithful to the phenomenological demand to attend only to how things appear.

As its name implies, methodological atheism underscores phenomenology’s vexed relationship to theology, that is, the existence of God as a philosophical question.<sup>6</sup> But methodological atheism’s scope includes not only the divine but also any assumed definition of the human being. Traditional humanism invokes metaphysical concepts like *imago Dei* and “rational animal” to define human nature; more recent humanisms retool these descriptions in the direction either of some fixed semantic or hidden spiritual “essence” that science cannot access or naturalistic appeals to our embodied and contextually situated relationship to the “environment,” “culture,” “history,” “society,” and so on. By invoking or taking such definitions

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<sup>6</sup> For a theological critique of methodological atheism in phenomenology, see DeLay 2022. As far as I can tell, nothing in Steven DeLay’s objection precludes preferring humanism over Christianity. In other words, methodological theism opens the door to metaphysical arbitrariness. Any *Weltanschauung* will do.

for granted, humanism always includes a form of methodological theism and is therefore incompatible with transcendental phenomenology. Husserl emphasizes this implication: “in the epoché...nothing human is to be found, neither soul nor psychic life nor real psychophysical human beings; all this belongs to the ‘phenomenon,’ to the world as constituted pole” (Husserl 1970: 183). Any “objective” definition of the “human being” must be bracketed and set aside in favor of attention to the phenomena *at issue*, which, unlike methodologically theistic and so externally imposed or inherited definitions, means always open to creative, sensitive, and revisable description.<sup>7</sup> But as Husserl frequently emphasizes, not taking entities metaphysically for granted or definitions as rigidified does not mean excluding such matters from philosophy. Rather, for the phenomenologist, humanism, that is, disciplinary practices concerning putative facts about human nature as depicted in art and history, is bracketed, treated as a phenomenon in the meaningful constitution of experience, and described.

The most refined extension of these phenomenological themes to the humanities as “a problem for philosophy itself” is accomplished in Gadamer’s hermeneutics (Gadamer 2004: 7). Despite their differences, Husserl’s method paves the way and provides the conceptual structure for Gadamer’s account of the humanities. Underscoring and developing Gadamer’s inheritance of Husserl’s method is essential for my project of a phenomenological approach to the humanities. Reduction and methodological atheism will again point the way, this time toward a phenomenological conception of the humanities that directly confronts humanism.

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<sup>7</sup> For this reason, I cannot agree with George Heffernan’s assessment that Husserl “advocates” a “human-being-as-rational-animal humanism” (Heffernan 2015: 204). Heffernan may be right that Husserl’s *Crisis* and Sartrean “existential” phenomenology “intersect where they focus on the human being and certain specifically human concerns” (Heffernan 2015: 193). My point, by contrast, is that Husserl’s references to “human concerns” should be understood in light of methodological atheism.

Like many members of the phenomenological movement, Gadamer does not voice a full-throated commitment to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Gadamer follows Martin Heidegger's "hermeneutic" turn in his declaration that "no freely chosen relation toward one's own being can get behind the facticity of this being" (Gadamer 2004: 254). Dasein is structured by historical traditions or "prejudices" into which it is "thrown" that precede and enable its modes of understanding and are not subjectively transparent. The "facticity" of Dasein, not the "transcendental ego," provides philosophy's starting point. Gadamer's hermeneutic premises, however, should not obscure other distinctively transcendental features of his approach.<sup>8</sup> In his 1965 reflections on *Truth and Method*, he maintains that "my book is phenomenological in its method" (Gadamer 2004: xxii). With this self-identification, Gadamer is explicit that he sees an underlying continuity between Husserl's method and Heidegger's hermeneutic program: "But I think that the principle of phenomenological demonstration can be applied to this term of Heidegger's" (Gadamer 2004: xxiii). For Gadamer, no clean separation may be made between Husserl's *transcendental* and Heidegger's *hermeneutic* phenomenologies. Gadamer cements his transcendental credentials when, invoking now Immanuel Kant, he says of the argument of *Truth and Method*: "This fundamental methodological approach avoids implying any metaphysical conclusions" (Gadamer 2004: xxiii). Whether Gadamer consistently adheres to this principle throughout his work is not obvious.<sup>9</sup> In this passage, he follows not only Kant's critical admonition against speculative metaphysics but also Husserlian metaphysical neutrality, as his previous allusions indicate. Gadamer is frank in his fidelity to the "conscientiousness of

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<sup>8</sup> Since I am focused here on Husserl, Gadamer's relation to Heidegger is beyond my present scope. Robert J. Dostal's recent overview of Gadamer's thought emphasizes his relation to Husserl (Dostal 2022: 168-174). Another reason to exclude Heidegger is that his stance on humanism is so complex and controversial that addressing it would take the present discussion too far afield.

<sup>9</sup> For a positive reading of Gadamer's metaphysical contributions to a renewed "theology," see Grondin 2023. I have criticized Gadamer's Hegelian metaphysics (Liakos 2024: 209-211).



phenomenological description which Husserl has made a duty for us all” (Gadamer 2004: xxiv). His hermeneutics follows the Husserlian model of careful description of first-person experience. But as the passages quoted here suggest, Gadamer’s commitment to phenomenology goes beyond descriptive rigor toward general methodological principles of transcendental philosophy.

Gadamer’s critique of humanism (as I defined the term) follows from this methodological inheritance of Husserl.<sup>10</sup> A phenomenology of understanding should be *transcendental*, that is, it should follow a reduction from facts to meaning and remain methodologically atheistic.

Gadamer’s account of the humanities preserves both these commitments from transcendental phenomenology.<sup>11</sup> Gadamer investigates *the experience at stake* in the arts and humanities. In doing so, he does not take disciplinary standards or facts at face value. His project is “an attempt to understand what the humanities truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of the world” (Gadamer 2004: xxii, translation modified). Gadamer’s hermeneutics sets aside the “methodological self-consciousness” of humanistic scholars to discover the real “experience” at issue in their investigations of art and history. First-order claims made by academic disciplines are bracketed in favor of attending to the second-order meaning underlying and enabling scholarly research: “But we shall not be able simply to accept the humanities’ own understanding of themselves, but must ask what their mode of understanding in truth is” (Gadamer 2004: 87, translation modified). In his critique of their methodological and scientific prejudices, Gadamer situates the humanities as a *phenomenon*, that is, he does not take their statements (their “own understanding

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<sup>10</sup> Given my definition of humanism, my analysis need not exhaust Gadamer’s stance on other registers of humanism, such as *Truth and Method*’s “guiding concepts of humanism,” namely, *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, judgment, and taste. For a salutary take on Gadamer’s treatment of these concepts as implying a “normative” ideal for research in the humanities, see George 2022: 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> My approach goes in a different direction from what has become known as “hermeneutic realism.” As Mirela Oliva emphasizes, the realist motivation is a *metaphysical* one: to grasp the “order” of “reality” (Oliva 2022: 214, 230). My view, by contrast, is transcendental and so *metaphysically neutral*.

of themselves”) for granted but rather brackets them to describe the way these claims are at issue (“what their mode of understanding in truth is”) in first-person meaningful experience.

Philosophical hermeneutics could be disputed by the practicing historian or literary critic as irrelevant to or ignorant of their ambitions to scholarly objectivity. But to this objection, the phenomenologist responds that her inquiry is not bound by first-order disciplinary standards, which are never authoritative for a phenomenological analysis of the second-order transcendental conditions of experience. Instead, the phenomenologist studies what is *at stake* in the first-person experience of meaning of anyone who (in this case) encounters history and art. The disciplinary sociology of Reitter and Wellmon and Haufe objectifies the study of the humanities, rendering their accounts deaf to the claims to meaning and effectivity that occur when history or art speak to me. By contrast, Gadamer’s hermeneutics takes as its premise a *philosophical departure from the self-conception of the humanities*, which gets suspended in favor of description of “what happens to us” when we investigate history and art (Gadamer 2004: xxvi). In Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology, the humanities come alive. By following Gadamer in bracketing disciplinary and scientific norms, the student of the past or the beautiful recognizes in philosophical hermeneutics her experience of finding herself transformed, surprised, or disturbed by her studies. In moving from the practice of a science to the meaning at issue in that science, Gadamer performs a version of the phenomenological *reduction*.

For Husserl, bracketing third-person claims reminds the phenomenologist that, ultimately, she is responsible for the constitution of meaning in her experience. In other words, no external discourse or objective science dictates the terms of what she takes as meaningful and so she takes nothing else as authoritative in describing what appears to her. In his attention to our factual thrownness into traditions, Gadamer is less resolutely individualistic than Husserl seems to be.

But Gadamer's practice of phenomenological reduction, like Husserl's, also implies a version of *methodological atheism*: "It is precisely through the school of phenomenology founded by Husserl that we have learnt the importance of recognizing what each of us must see for ourselves" (Gadamer 1996: 137). Gadamer's account of our contemporary alienation from the tradition of Christian humanism illustrates this ambition: "The hermeneutical problem only emerges clearly when there is no powerful tradition present to absorb one's own attitude into itself and when one is aware of confronting an alien tradition to which one has never belonged or one he no longer unquestioningly accepts" (Gadamer 1976: 46). The Christian humanistic *Weltanschauung*, supported by the coherent historical transmission of metaphysical concepts from classical antiquity, could take for granted premises about human nature and the divine that encouraged medieval and Renaissance scholars to model themselves after their Greek and Roman predecessors.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, philosophical hermeneutics takes its point of departure from the contemporary untenability of such transmissions. The humanistic scholar today is alienated from a theological tradition that she does not accept on faith, since her horizon is shaped by historical fractures, like scientific reason and secularization, which separate her from the religious past.<sup>13</sup> In this situation, the student of history comes to terms with concepts that require hermeneutic work to comprehend because their significance is no longer self-evident. In other words, hermeneutics only becomes operative when understanding a tradition is not a matter of course. Gadamer is famous for emphasizing that prejudices cannot be ignored—but they also cannot be taken on faith. The hermeneutic phenomenologist brackets metaphysical or

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<sup>12</sup> I have taken this lesson from Kathy Eden's excellent study of the humanistic tradition's retrieval of ancient hermeneutics (Eden 1997: 27-31).

<sup>13</sup> These considerations raise questions for David Carr's claim that a phenomenology of history uncovers an "unmediated connection with the past" (Carr 2021: 158). On fractured horizons, see Liakos 2024.

anthropological premises inherited from tradition precisely because she is not in a position to accept them at face value.

Methodological theists like Hart and Clair make metaphysically substantive assumptions in their historical scholarship. Gadamer, by contrast, does not take the humanistic tradition as providing unproblematic, first-order metaphysical premises.<sup>14</sup> Instead, he treats any tradition's claims as phenomena at issue in meaningful experience. Humanistic concepts like *Geist* or "genius," for example, have "a wealth of history" which demands scrutiny and cannot be taken for granted (Gadamer 2004: 6, 9). Gadamer's hermeneutics encourages us to investigate historical phenomena to discover their interpretive warrant and validity in our first-person encounters with them rather than assuming these statements as a metaphysical ground. By refusing to grant the metaphysical presuppositions of the humanistic and theological traditions from the outset of interpretation, Gadamer practices methodological atheism.

One of his studies of Rainer Maria Rilke illustrates Gadamer's phenomenological approach. Gadamer objects to the Catholic priest Romano Guardini's "theological criticism" of Rilke (Gadamer 1994: 140n). Adhering to methodological theism, Guardini sees Rilke's poetry as an admirable but unsuccessful attempt at establishing "religious authority" (Gadamer 1994: 141). Guardini emphasizes purported metaphysical errors in Rilke's poetry. For Gadamer, Guardini's scholarship proceeds from a *theological* perspective that is categorically inappropriate to a *hermeneutical* investigation of Rilke's poetic "expression of truth" (Gadamer 1994: 140). In response to Guardini's dogmatic position, Gadamer asks: "But is what the poems say for this

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<sup>14</sup> To this extent, Richard J. Bernstein's judgment that Gadamer's "entire philosophic project can be characterized as an apologia for humanistic learning" is not so much false as misleading (Bernstein 1983: 180). Closer to my view is Dennis J. Schmidt's assessment of the differences between hermeneutics and humanism (Schmidt 2022: 47n20). For Schmidt, hermeneutics is not humanism because hermeneutics emphasizes the *limits* of the human being. But this theme has often been prominent in the humanistic tradition. The difference between Gadamerian hermeneutics and humanism should be understood in light of phenomenology.

reason not true? Does not every person find it true when the poetic I views itself both as the one who is learning and the one who is unteachable, for whom the selflessness of true feeling and thereby also true love is impossible? Is this standard really false?" (Gadamer 1994: 143).

Gadamer adopts a phenomenological "standard" for poetic interpretation against Guardini's methodological theism. No theological assumptions can delegitimize the address of "the poetic I." When reading Rilke's poetry, the proper interpretive standard is not whether the poem conforms to some assumed metaphysical scheme but rather whether it applies to the "true feeling" at issue in the interpreter's experience. Irrespective of any theological concept, the poem is "true" to the extent that it captures my first-person experience as simultaneously "one who is learning and...one who is unteachable." Gadamer's critique of Guardini exemplifies a general interpretive principle: "it is a necessary hermeneutic requirement for all interpretation of poetry, to allow oneself to be struck by the word of the poet" (Gadamer 1994: 143). Metaphysical and theological assumptions must be set aside in favor of description of the first-person experience of hearing "the word of the poet," that is, the way the poem's statements "apply" or relevantly speak to and illuminate my situation (Liakos 2022). I open myself to the poet's address by bracketing third-person discourses and asking myself only whether "the word" seems relevant to what appears to me. In other words, poetic interpretation *follows methodological atheism* by taking nothing for granted except what is warranted by the first-person perspective in its interplay with a bracketed object of interpretation.

In Gadamer's practice of reduction and methodological atheism, I have emphasized his inheritance of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Gadamer may not subscribe to Husserl's transcendental architectonic but the move from third-person facts to first-person meaning and the resolute refusal to take metaphysical assumptions for granted guide a *distinctively*

*phenomenological account of the humanities* whose outline is found in Gadamer's work.

Humanism proceeds from the third-person perspective of disciplinary sociology, whose first-order method accepts the metaphysical biases of methodological theism. By contrast, Husserl and Gadamer model a phenomenological account that takes a transcendental and first-person approach to disclosing the second-order meaning at issue in being addressed by claims from art and history in which no metaphysical or scientific premises may be assumed. To this extent, Husserl and Gadamer enable the thoroughgoing rejection of humanism.

### §3. The event of the humanities

In another *Crisis* manuscript, Husserl writes: "But now I turn around, through the transcendental reduction, and there now arises a humanistic science which does not have the world in advance and does not constantly hold onto the world" (Husserl 1970: 326). This sketch of a phenomenological "humanistic science" crystallizes the main points I have made so far. "Transcendental reduction" and refusing to "have the world in advance" are the twin premises of such a discipline. As I have argued, Gadamerian hermeneutics accords with both these commitments in broad outline. But aside from a few references, I have not yet given an account of what the humanities without humanism would look like as a practice of inquiry. With the philosophical background now in place, I will illustrate how I conceptualize this phenomenologically inspired form of scholarship through an example.

The practicing historian or critic may find transcendental phenomenology methodologically ascetic and metaphysically austere. Its strict theoretical self-discipline seems alien to the lived reality of the humanities as academic fields and existentially engaged forms of study. The best case for a transcendental phenomenology of the humanities is that *it describes humanistic study better than humanism does*. Like any phenomenological argument, its

validation is self-given and first-person evidence. My gambit is that, now that the methodological heavy lifting is concluded, this approach furnishes a fresh, intuitive, and plausible look into the experience at stake in studying and teaching the humanities. Put another way, my goal here is to describe the “event” of the humanities, that is, *how the humanities happen*. This approach may not break any ground in the crisis of the humanities, but it offers the vocabulary to describe accurately and persuasively the experience of studying art, history, and philosophy. Phenomenology gives humanistic scholars permission to recognize and affirm the validity of what they already do.

A text by the Italian Renaissance humanist Petrarch provides a case study of the event of the humanities that happens to be historically prominent but, more importantly, is phenomenologically apt. In a letter dated April 26, 1336 and commonly known as *The Ascent of Mount Ventoux*, Petrarch describes a conversion experience in which “the agile, immortal soul” that “can reach its goal in the twinkling of an eye without intermediate space” comes to occupy his attention (Petrarch 1985: 14). How does consciousness become thematic on a leisurely hike? During a conversation that takes place early in the journey, an “old shepherd” predicts, based on his own attempt “some fifty years before,” that the mountaineering experiment of Petrarch and his companions is bound to end in disappointment (Petrarch 1985: 12). Disturbed by these comments, competing with his hardy hiking partner brother, and out of sheer “laziness,” the poet vainly searches for circuitous shortcuts up the mountain (Petrarch 1985: 13). But this attempt to circumvent the physical exertion required by the climb disorients Petrarch and impedes his progress. Just as he reaches this low point, his “thoughts quickly turned from material things to the spiritual” (Petrarch 1985: 13). Circumstances demand that Petrarch shift his attention from the outer realm of “worldly object[s]” to the inner “soul,” from what is externally or superficially

important to what is constitutive of what matters (Petrarch 1985: 17). This decision and its implications are distinctively phenomenological *avant la lettre*.

Eventually, Petrarch reaches the summit. Shaken by his struggles and the episode with the shepherd, Petrarch has “turned an inward eye upon” himself (Petrarch 1985: 17). In a disciplined effort at addressing a spiritual problem, he has shifted his focus from the outer world and third-person facts to inner consciousness and first-person meaning. He thereby performs a nascent version of the phenomenological *reduction*. No longer satisfied with the way the world looks “objectively” and seems to exert a grip on other people like the shepherd, Petrarch looks to his own conscious ego to find why and how anything matters to him at all. It is not mere rhetorical excess that leads Husserl to say that the reduction enacts “a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion”; Petrarch’s spiritual rebirth anticipates this radical shift in priorities (Husserl 1970: 137; see also Knies 2021: 96).<sup>15</sup> Having reached his goal atop the mountain and in the midst of the change of mindset that he has undergone in achieving it, Petrarch recalls that he brought along a copy of Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* in his pocket: “I opened the little volume, small in size but infinitely sweet, with the intention of reading whatever came to hand, for what else could I happen upon if not edifying and devout words” (Petrarch 1985: 17). He opens the *Confessions* at random and reads aloud the following passage from Book 10: “And men go about admiring the high mountains and the mighty waves of the sea and the wide sweep of rivers and the sound of the ocean and the movement of the stars, but they themselves they abandon” (quoted in Petrarch 1985: 17). These words shake Petrarch to his core:

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<sup>15</sup> Without comparing them directly, Hans Blumenberg discusses Husserl and Petrarch in the context of modernity’s metaphorical self-conception as a radical “new beginning” (Blumenberg 2010: 54-55).



I was ashamed, and asking my brother, who was anxious to hear more, not to bother me, I closed the book, angry with myself for continuing to admire the things of this world when I should have learned a long time ago from the pagan philosophers themselves that nothing is admirable but the soul beside whose greatness nothing can be as great. (Petrarch 1985: 17)

Occupying the reduced vantagepoint of his ego (“soul”), Petrarch is transformed by Augustine’s claim concerning the vanity of the external world and the necessity of self-knowledge. Petrarch sees, after the reduction, how this passage applies to his own superficial lifestyle and neglect of existential matters. Because Petrarch has bracketed the world and external standards (“the things of this world”), Augustine’s words speak to and find their measure in Petrarch’s first-person experience. I am transformed by and disclose the text’s meaning when I have attained the insight that my consciousness constitutes (“nothing is admirable but the soul”) the meaning at issue in my experience, including of textual study. Phenomenological reduction prepares the way for the paradigmatic form of the study of the humanities.

Petrarch dramatizes this phenomenological problematic through his narrative staging of his apparently fateful hermeneutic encounter (“with the intention of reading whatever came to hand”). Is coming across this passage, which is disturbingly relevant to his thought process from only moments before, a fateful accident or an artificial and exaggerated fabrication? Whatever the case may be, the scene is meant to suggest that only someone who has already turned their attention from world to consciousness embodies the proper comportment for understanding a text. Put another way, only the transcendental phenomenologist is ready to hear properly the text’s claim to meaning. Petrarch shifts from third-person facts to first-person meaning just as he reads Augustine encouraging him to undergo this revision. Petrarch’s theoretical concepts as well

as the text he chooses for his example of humanistic study both underscore this conversion experience. In short, Petrarch's reading of Augustine exemplifies the essential role of phenomenological reduction for the study of the humanities.

Readings of the *Ventoux* letter that neglect phenomenology could suggest that Petrarch's encounter with Augustine shows his continuity with the theological tradition.<sup>16</sup> In other words, Petrarch's text would exemplify *humanism* because his line of reasoning resuscitates classical metaphysics ("I should have learned a long time ago from the pagan philosophers themselves"). This inference is not incorrect but, as the letter's anticipation of phenomenological reduction already indicates, is far from the most important matter at stake here. Reflecting on Augustine's impact on him, Petrarch declares, "I believed that what I had read there was written *for me and no one else*" (Petrarch 1985: 17, emphasis added). The significance of the Augustine passage here is neither its objective standing in tradition, which would be stutable in third-person disciplinary terms, nor its formulation of a fixed anthropological definition of "human nature" in comparison with the divine. For Petrarch, who resolutely brackets all such traditional interpretations of Augustine, only how Augustine effectively speaks to his first-person standpoint matters in this moment.

The meaning at issue in what appears to me provides the point of departure for interpretation. Here Petrarch follows *methodological atheism*. Augustine's authority cannot be declared or asserted as a matter of course; it must be warranted (which means it can also be rejected) by its impact on the reader. Petrarch's proto-phenomenological critique of

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<sup>16</sup> The standard but recently debated view is that Petrarch was the "father" of humanism (Hankins 2007: 39). To his credit, Ernst Cassirer avoids this platitude: "Petrarch was one of the first of those who did not concern themselves with the merely objective content of historical creations. Instead he looked behind these creations to the lives of the creators, to feel them and re-live them" (Cassirer 1963: 129). Cassirer does not bring phenomenology into the picture, however. Closer to my reading, but characteristically cryptic and elliptical, is Blumenberg 1983: 342.

methodological theism is initiated by the shepherd's admonition not to ascend the mountain because he already tried and failed at the task. Although provoked by and (so listening to) this warning from tradition, Petrarch ultimately ignores the shepherd in favor of finding his own way, with all the painful mistakes that choice inevitably entails. My "self-responsibility" is primarily at issue (Husserl 1970: 197). From his encounter with Augustine, the poet concludes that no external authority can usurp the first-person responsibility for the disclosure of meaning: "I thought in silence of the vanity in us mortals who neglect what is noblest in ourselves in a vain show only because we look around ourselves for what can be found only within us" (Petrarch 1985: 18). Petrarch's conversion has led him to accept not any fixed theological, metaphysical, or anthropological definitions but rather methodological atheism.

On Petrarch's telling, *the humanities happen without humanism*, that is, independently of or prior to the disciplinary sociology and methodological theism criticized by Husserl and Gadamer. Transcendental phenomenology unearths the event of the humanities. In yet another important respect, Petrarch's *Ventoux* letter resonates with phenomenology. After quoting from Augustine, Petrarch refers to an episode from Book 8 of Augustine's *Confessions* in which he opens the Epistles of Saint Paul at random and discovers a passage that applied directly to his struggles with addiction and sin, thereby converting him to faith: Augustine "believed this scripture to have been spoken specifically to him" (Petrarch 1985: 18). Petrarch's flash of insight is aided by an analogous literary example of self-discovery. Put another way, Petrarch finding himself in Augustine's text imitates Augustine finding himself in the New Testament.

This structure of self-reflective doubling recurs throughout Petrarch's text. Petrarch's encounter with Augustine describes what it is like to study the humanities, thereby providing a model for humanistic study. Further, Augustine and Petrarch *depict* the turn from the outer world

to the inner soul and *encourage* readers to do the same for themselves. If my interpretation is right, then Petrarch performs a nascent phenomenological reduction, which implies methodological atheism; the reader who takes these conclusions seriously infers that she herself should engage in these phenomenological acts. In sum, I read Petrarch's *Ventoux* letter both through the interpretive lens of transcendental phenomenology and as actually doing phenomenology. These methodological gymnastics appropriately fit a text that anticipates Husserl, according to whom phenomenology's "fate...is to become involved again and again in paradoxes" (Husserl 1970: 181; see also Crowell 2019: 343). The human subject, in his central example, is both "a subject for the world and at the same an object in the world" (Husserl 1970: 178). Petrarch's letter is susceptible to a structurally similar "paradox." The *founder of humanism* shows also the way to *overcome* it. *The Ascent of Mount Ventoux* is both an "object" within humanism and the "subject" that stands beyond or outside it, anticipating and revealing a phenomenologically inspired way of studying and teaching the humanities without humanism.

Neither disciplinary sociology nor methodological theism yields the descriptive insights into the humanities of Petrarch's proto-phenomenological treatment. Since the phenomenology of the humanities is marked by paradox, it cannot offer any definitive thesis on or solution to the crisis. As Petrarch learns when he tries to avoid the most demanding parts of his mountain climb, transcendental phenomenology admits of no shortcuts. Husserl emphasizes the necessity of this existential commitment when he warns of phenomenology's "long and thorny path" (Husserl 2014: 172). Philosophical hermeneutics follows transcendental phenomenology in Gadamer's recognition that interpreting is "an infinite process" (Gadamer 2004: 298). Teachers and scholars of the humanities who recognize their practice in the foregoing account would assent to the following phenomenological insight upon which Petrarch, Husserl, and Gadamer converge. The

artworks, texts, and traditional objects studied by the humanities are never static or authoritative but must rather be taken up anew by each individual scholar in her own way. The phenomenology of the humanities thereby produces not *aporia* but rather an ongoing research project grounded in a methodological opposition to humanism.

The trope of “defending” or “making the case for” the humanities is a familiar one. By practicing phenomenology, this paper has avoided that argumentative strategy, however practically necessary and spiritually nourishing it may seem in the context of the diminishing prospects for the humanities under contemporary capitalism. Rather, I have sought to describe only what always already happens in the study of art, history, and philosophy. This argument reveals the binding, self-given normativity belonging to the humanities when disciplinary standards and metaphysical assumptions are bracketed and the scholar resolves to accept the authority only of the first-person point of view seen in a transcendental light. The existential commitment at issue in humanistic study, the sense of responsibility for interpreting which is both lonely and invigorating, is here foregrounded. Such a view is the provenance achieved by what I refer to as the *phenomenological humanities*.

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