

## RESEARCH STATEMENT

### Steven DeLay

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Since completing my doctoral studies at Oxford in 2017, I have published two monographs: *Before God: Exercises in Subjectivity* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020) and *Phenomenology in France: A Philosophical and Theological Introduction* (Routledge, 2019). *Phenomenology in France* has established itself as the definitive introduction to the so-called “theological turn” in contemporary phenomenology. I followed it with the publication of the other monograph just mentioned. *Before God* is a work of philosophical anthropology deconstructing oversimplistic divisions between theology and philosophy, and that articulates a comprehensive view of human existence. While the first book focused on French thinkers exclusively, in the second book German philosophical figures and traditions (among others) feature prominently throughout. The first chapter, for instance, challenges Heidegger’s distinction between philosophy and theology, and the work’s penultimate chapter turns to Nietzsche, arguing against him that it is in fact possible to affirm suffering without recourse to lies. With the publication of both books along with many articles, chapters, and reviews, my work has become well-known in the phenomenological world. I am now aiming to reach a wider philosophical audience. I try to write works that transcend the analytic-continental divide, and that are accessible to general readers. The new book I aim to write, *Conscience: A Philosophical History*, will show how the programs of German Enlightenment and Idealism and phenomenology, as well as Nietzsche and Freud, contributed crucially to the formation of the concept of conscience, and how the revisionist understanding of conscience—as represented by Marx’s, Nietzsche’s, and Freud’s “school of suspicion” —came to be.

*Before God* has been endorsed by senior figures at the University of Cambridge and Furman University. Jean-Yves Lacoste has said, “The preposition ‘before’, *coram* in the Latin, has had a distinguished intellectual history since Luther discovered its importance in Jerome’s translation of the Bible. Steven DeLay comes after many theologians and philosophers who have described what man is ‘before God’ — and who have done so because they found it fruitless to speak of man as he ‘is,’ substantially and before all relation. This clear and precise book summarizes a long episode. An original contribution to philosophy, it also brings noteworthy precisions.” In another endorsement, J. Aaron Simmons has said, “Henry David Thoreau once wrote that ‘there are nowadays professors of philosophy, but no philosophers.’ ... Steven DeLay is a striking and exciting counter to this trend. In the very best sense of the term: DeLay is a *philosopher* in that he is devoted to a life in which he sees his task as in line with Thoreau’s description: ‘to love wisdom and to live according to its dictates.’ ... Far from simply being a book ‘about’ philosophers and theologians, *Before God* itself stands as an ‘exercise’ in thinking and living well.” In his review in *Phenomenological Reviews*, Walter Hopp has said, “DeLay certainly has a ‘zeal for wisdom’, and his book is, ultimately, about how to identify and obtain the ‘supreme good’. The short answer lies in the title: we should live our lives ‘before God’. The long answer can only be acquired by reading the book. For what DeLay offers is a series of powerfully

written and insightful reflections on what a life lived before God looks like for the one who lives it [...] It is a work of immense wisdom, compelling arguments, and rich phenomenological descriptions. It is, finally, a refreshing reminder of what draws most of us to philosophy in the first place: to grapple with ultimate questions of human existence, with clarity of thought and expression, and without methodological evasions.”

*Before God* was anticipated in the phenomenology community, as it is my first research monograph following on *Phenomenology in France*. Drawing on the history of philosophy in order to deconstruct traditional divisions between theology and philosophy in the name of a phenomenological approach that describes the contours of lived existence, *Before God* is a significant addition to my academic profile. It showed that my work is relevant to philosophers and theologians working in many traditions and specialties. While *Phenomenology in France* at this point is better known, I think *Before God* will ultimately prove to be the more important of the two. It is the work where I develop a view of my own, and philosophize freely, whereas the first book was largely exegetical. A book symposium will be dedicated to it at *Syndicate*.

*Phenomenology in France* has received international attention. Claudio Tarditi in his review wrote, “[I]n DeLay's book there is much more than what can be summarized in a review ... it develops a fundamental argument about the fruitfulness of a radical reassessment of the relation between philosophy and theology for the phenomenological reflection that is still to come.” The editors at *Phenomenological Reviews* then selected the book to inaugurate a new series at the journal wherein authors respond to their reviewers. It was also selected for review in the inaugural issue of the *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion*, where the reviewer William L. Connelly said, “In treating these authors and these subjects DeLay provides clear relief of the established phenomenological tradition coming from Husserl and Heidegger, thereby granting the text a remarkable unity despite covering such a wide range of distinct figures and topics ... DeLay's text balances two competing aims, the first in addressing the need for more commentary on those figures most productively interrogating the legacy of Heidegger and Husserl, and secondly, to introduce the texts in their own terms, and in their own styles, so that readers can enter into their own distinctive world ... In total, we find a noteworthy contribution on two fronts: a compellingly clear account of intellectual history, and a unique contribution to the ongoing work of phenomenology itself.” Despite disagreeing philosophically with the material introduced in the text, respected figures as François Raffoul have recognized the book's scholarly importance: “[T]he book is a well-written and provocative work, which makes for a lively reading and which gives much to think.”

The monograph received endorsements from eminent phenomenologists in Paris. For instance, Claude Romano at the Sorbonne has said, “Steven DeLay offers a very careful and complete overview of French phenomenology from the 1980s to the present. He shows that - far from being concerned only with parochial issues - this phenomenology is an original and valuable contribution to philosophy in general.” Jean-Yves Lacoste has said, “Steven DeLay is the heir of a long and distinguished history, and he lives in an academic world where many distinguished scholars have been influenced by their French colleagues. His book was well needed: after many original contributions to phenomenology in the wake of the French reception of Husserl and

Heidegger, there was room left for a comprehensive introduction to French figures who have done something to keep phenomenology alive and creative. DeLay has provided Anglophone readers with such an introduction. He has done it thoroughly. And his is the work of a historian of philosophy who is also a promising philosopher in his own right.” Finally, in his endorsement of the book, Emmanuel Falque wrote that it “must be put in all hands, not only for what it gives to understand, but also for what it gives to think. Every philosophy has a present and a future, and it is all the merit of this introduction to really demonstrate it.” *Phenomenology in France* has become the definitive introduction to the “theological turn” in phenomenology. It also set the conceptual itinerary for my second monograph, which begins with a critical assessment of Heidegger’s understanding of the relation between theology and philosophy. If I try to produce work that is creative and original, that is because writing *Phenomenology in France* was a formative experience in my life as a scholar. I wrote the book without any academic appointment or any institutional funding. It was simply a labor of love. In writing it, I came to embrace the meaning of philosophy as a way of life, and it is a book that I think has earned the respect of the thinkers in France whom it covers. Being entrusted to write it was a great honor, and something that taught me to be judicious and sensitive when reading the work of others. Currently, it is being translated into Turkish and Chinese.

A 2020 article, “Being Oneself: Self-Consciousness in Husserl and Henry,” is due in a special issue on Husserl in *Philosophy Kitchen*. It also has appeared in translation in Issue 63 of *Sabah Ülkesi*, a Turkish culture magazine in Germany that has published contributions from Hans Belting, Peter Burke, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, William Chittick, Graham Harman, Peter Adamson, Frank Griffel, François Raffoul, Catherine Malabou, Rémi Brague, Françoise Dastur, Graham Priest, Daniel Heller-Roazen, John Milbank, Terry Pinkard, Jean Grondin, Nader al-Bizri, Rudiger Safranski, Abdelfattah Kilito, Markus Gabriel, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Carlo Ginzburg, Jacob Rogozinski, Renaud Barbaras, Michael Taussig, and Donatella Di Cesare. The article provides an accessible overview of the phenomenological tradition’s handling of the question of self-consciousness starting with Jean-Paul Sartre and the subsequent dispute between Michel Henry and Edmund Husserl. In so doing, I show that Dan Zahavi’s reading of Henry’s objection to Husserl, while correct so far as it goes, does not address the deepest source of disagreement between Henry and Husserl—the problem is how to interpret the facticity of consciousness. Henry takes things in an explicitly theological direction, whereas in the texts under consideration, Husserl does not (though I know he makes room for God in some of his later manuscripts). Accessible to a wide audience, including both specialists (as in the *Philosophy Kitchen* Husserl special issue) and general readers (as in the *Sabah Ülkesi* consciousness issue), this piece is characteristic of my work’s style. The fact that the editor commissioned the translation and readers of the publication know of my work was for me as a writer a significant milestone: I write purely for the love of writing and the hope that readers will take something of value from the work, so it was encouraging to know that my work has been reaching people.

A 2019 article, “The Vanity of Authenticity,” published in *Sophia* originated from doctoral material I wrote while at Oxford. It brings the work of Jean-Luc Marion into direct dialogue with the Anglophone secondary literature on Husserl and Heidegger, showing how scholars working

on both French and German figures have common philosophical ground that remains to be explored. To me, this piece is important from an institutional perspective, because I think it shows a way forward beyond the traditional territory wars marking international phenomenology research. My hope is that those who read it will be led to move forward in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, rather than defensiveness and hostility.

Currently, I am working on my third monograph, *In the Spirit*, which will be published with John Hunt Publishing. The book articulates an existence “in the Spirit” through a series of meditations on matters of basic human concern: love, hope, suffering, and death. With attention to the Bible and works of art (including Bellini, Caravaggio, Hopper, Kandinsky, Ossawa Tanner, Pissarro, Rembrandt, and Rodin), it explores the depths of the human experience. A contribution to the spiritualist tradition of edifying works by Fénelon, Kierkegaard, and Chrétien, *In the Spirit* celebrates the glory of being human in light of the Word of God.

I am editing a philosophical volume on the work of American film director Terrence Malick. With twenty international contributors, *Life above the Clouds: Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick* (SUNY Press) will be an excellent resource for students and scholars in aesthetics, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of religion, philosophy of film, phenomenology, and existentialism. It will also be useful to those in related fields such as theology, film studies, art criticism, and cultural studies. I have never written on the philosophy of film, so this is new territory for me, but I love learning new things, and so this project is one I am finding exhilarating, and something that is stirring me to learn as much as possible and to expand my intellectual horizons.

I am also currently editing a series at Richard Marshall’s *3:16 AM*. Entitled “Finding Meaning: Philosophy, Art, and Science in the Age of Nihilism,” the series commissions contributors working from a variety of perspectives to reflect on what the philosophical life means to them personally. In doing so, they do not attempt just to account for what personally led them to philosophy, but what philosophy itself has become today in the wake of “the death of God,” the age of nihilism. Weekly installments are likely to begin appearing in October or November of 2020.

Finally, in the months ahead, I’ll be working on a number of essays: one addressing objections to the “theological turn” in phenomenology for a Routledge handbook, another discussing the *imago Dei* for a collection on posthumanism, a third for a special issue on the difference between spirituality and religion, a fourth discussing the phenomenological reduction for a volume on the work of Jean-Yves Lacoste, and a final essay for a volume on the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien.