

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Steven DeLay

Ambrose College, Woolf University
Old Member, Christ Church, University of Oxford

Since completing my doctoral studies at Oxford in 2017, I have completed three monographs: *In the Spirit* (John Hunt Publishing, 2021), *Before God: Exercises in Subjectivity* (Rowman & 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 *Before God*, which is a work of Christian existentialism 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, German philosophical figures and traditions (among others) feature prominently throughout *Before God*. 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. I am also the editor of *Life above the Clouds: Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick* (2022), and the editor of *Finding Meaning: Philosophy in Crisis* (2022), a volume based on the collection of online essays, “Finding Meaning,” published at Mr Richard Marshall’s *3:16 AM*. Mr Marshall is known for his long-standing philosophy interview series that has interviewed hundreds of leading philosophers across the world. Mr Marshall’s commissioning me to edit the series was an extraordinary honor—there is only one other series like it, “Flickering Shadows: Truth in 16mm,” Prof Huw Price’s series analyzing a 1973 conversation between the Oxford philosophers P.F. Strawson and Gareth Evans. With the publication of these books and edited volumes along with many articles, chapters, and reviews, I am at the moment probably the most prolific phenomenological philosopher working in the world in English.

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 paperback is due out in 2021.

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.

I am now aiming to reach a wider philosophical audience, with work that is accessible to general readers. To that end, my third monograph, *In the Spirit* articulates an existence of faith in Christ. With attention to the Bible and works of art (Caravaggio, Doré, Pissarro, Poussin, Rembrandt, and Rodin), it explores the depths of the human experience, offering a descriptive account of our personal encounter with God. A contribution to the longstanding tradition of edifying Christian works, it extols the glory of being human in light of God’s word.

The next academic monograph I will be writing, *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.

A 2021 article that explores the spiritual senses vis-à-vis Heidegger and Locke, “The Heart Senses,” appeared in translation in Issue 66 of *Sabah Ülkesi*, a Turkish culture magazine published 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, Donatella Di Cesare, and Richard Kearney, and Dan Zahavi.

A 2020 article, “Being Oneself: Self-Consciousness in Husserl and Henry,” appeared in a special issue on Husserl in *Philosophy Kitchen*. It also has appeared in Issue 63 of *Sabah Ülkesi*. 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.

I am editing a philosophical volume on the work of American film director Terrence Malick. With twenty contributors, *Life above the Clouds: Philosophy in the Films of Terrence Malick* (SUNY Press, 2022) 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 have also just finished editing a series at Richard Marshall's *3:16 AM*. Entitled “Finding Meaning,” the series commissioned contributors working from a variety of perspectives to reflect on what the philosophical life means to them personally. In doing so, they not only 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. A print volume titled *Finding Meaning: Philosophy in Crisis* will be appearing with Wipf & Stock.

A paper drawing on Karl Jaspers entitled “Being True” has appeared in a special issue at *Religions* on the difference between spirituality and religion. I've also completed work on a number of other essays due to appear soon. First, “Methodological Atheism Considered,” a piece which addresses popular objections to the so-called “theological turn” in phenomenology for the *Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Theology*. Second, a paper entitled “Lacoste on

Appearing and Reduction” for a volume on the work of Jean-Yves Lacoste. Third, a paper entitled “The Word’s Inexhaustibility: Jean-Louis Chrétien’s *De La Fatigue*” for a volume on the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien. And finally, an essay called “Waiting on Love” for a volume on the phenomenology of love.

I am currently seeking a publisher for an existential novel I’ve recently completed titled *Everything: A Novel on Meaning in Three Parts*. At the moment, I’ve begun working on another monograph, *Faint Not*, which will be a sort of follow-on to *In the Spirit*. Further developing the phenomenology of faith begun in *In the Spirit*, it articulates how the existence lived before God—one of hope, faith, and love—is the life which transfigures temporality in light of eternity, the life, in short, which accordingly perseveres to the end, to that of eternal life.

Finally, I have recently done a lecture on Michel Henry for Rev. Tim Hull’s *Timeline: Faith and Philosophy* youtube series. In the new year, I will be doing a second lecture on phenomenology and the theological turn.