Cont Philos Rev (2016) 49:559–565
DOI 10.1007/s11007-016-9399-8

Tom Sparrow: The end of phenomenology: Metaphysics and the new realism

Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2014, xvi + 197 pp, $34.95 (pbk), ISBN: 9780748684830

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Published online: 12 November 2016

Any book bold enough to announce in its title the end of an entire philosophical tradition is bound to draw attention to itself, as well as raise a few eyebrows of those who perceive their own work as being within, or part of, that tradition. This is especially true if the tradition in question is phenomenology, which still enjoys the status of being a rich, lively, and fertile ground for philosophical research. Its stature, especially in so-called continental philosophy, also means that it represents an unavoidable point of reference even for those philosophers who are looking to place and develop their thought wholly outside of, or beyond, phenomenology. This is the background of Tom Sparrow's *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism*.

After briefly setting the scene by tying in Graham Harman, the 2007 Goldsmiths colloquium, and speculative realism, the book's Preface clearly states its basic premise, intent, and course. Believing that "it is ultimately necessary to close the door on phenomenology as an approach to realism," the author sets out to explain why "Harman and the other speculative realists are not and cannot be phenomenologists, as well as how the methods of speculative realism fulfil the promise of phenomenological realism." (xi) Sparrow then tries to accomplish this over the course of the book, which consists of an Introduction, five chapters, and a Conclusion that bears the triumphant subtitle 'After the End of Phenomenology.'

The book allows for, and in fact expressly acknowledges (xiii), a neat division into two parts which are thematically unified (both share the preoccupation with the metaphysics of realism), but differ significantly in their approach, goals, and even style. In the first part, which includes the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2 ('"Realism" in Phenomenology' and 'The Rhetoric of Realism in Phenomenology,' respectively), we see Sparrow mounting an attack on the idea that phenomenology

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could ever deliver a *bona fide* metaphysically realist position. This portion of the book, other than simply criticizing phenomenology, also prepares the ground for the positive, if diverse accounts of speculative or metaphysical realism. The three remaining chapters thus constitute the second, far less polemical part of the book, and serve as summarizing introductions to certain figures and ideas broadly fitting under the umbrella term 'speculative realism.' Chapter 3, 'Phenomenology as Strong Correlationism,' offers a summary of 'correlationism,' a central concept for the speculative realist's critique of phenomenology, as introduced by Quentin Meillassoux. Under the title of 'Phenomenology: A Philosophy of Access,' Chapter 4 provides an elegant summary of the central points of Graham Harman's object-oriented philosophy, whilst the concluding Chapter 5, 'Proliferating the Real,' fleetingly discusses a number of thinkers (among them Iain Hamilton Grant and Ray Brassier, also Goldsmiths panelists) and points out the diversity of directions in which these thinkers are taking speculative realism, thus 'proliferating the real.'

Sparrow's premise is that phenomenology and speculative realism are two basic, and also rival, approaches to a decidedly realist philosophy. Only, according to Sparrow, phenomenology is utterly incapable of ever fully delivering a true realism, with all the metaphysical and ontological commitments that accompany it. At best, phenomenology once usefully hinted at the possibility of one such realism. In order to show that speculative realism is the only game in town if we are looking to reach the 'Great Outdoors' of realism, or the fabled *things themselves*, it then becomes necessary to pre-emptively dispel the notion that phenomenology has any claim to realism. The Archimedes's lever that enables Sparrow to do all this heavy lifting is the notion of correlationism, or, alternatively, philosophy of access.

The technical term 'correlationism' was introduced by Meillassoux in *After Finitude* and is a term of wide scope, encompassing critical and post-critical philosophies that, explicitly or implicitly, endorse the idea that there is no sense in talking about the way things are *apart* from the way they are for a knowing subject. In other words, for a correlationist, it is impossible to know or have access to an object in itself, outside of its relation to a subject. Now, while the converse is also at least partly true, i.e. that correlationism excludes the possibility of free-floating, object-creating subjects, both Meillassoux and Sparrow (and, presumably, the rest of the speculative realists) see correlationism as harboring an inescapable latent idealism. This is also true of phenomenology, which is understood as the example *par excellence* of 'strong correlationism,' i.e. of the idea that "not only is the absolute (in itself) unknowable, it is also *unthinkable*." (89)

This general perspective on phenomenology allows Sparrow to develop a basic strategy for criticizing it. The strategy, followed incessantly throughout the book, roughly consists in two separate and complementary arguments. First, Sparrow continually underscores that if phenomenology is to be understood as a consistent philosophical movement or approach *at all*—something the author himself is skeptical about, if only for rhetorical effect (xi–xiii)—its practitioners must be bound by some sort of method. Predictably, Sparrow locates phenomenology's unique method in a combination of Husserl's principle of all principles (§24 *Ideas I*) and the insistence, both Husserl's and of his successors, on the idea of the reduction.

Now, Sparrow contends, if the reductions and direct intuition-driven research are the necessary (and sufficient?) condition for doing phenomenology, then the phenomenologist is inherently limited in what she can rightfully claim about the world and herself as an object in the world. Because the phenomenologist is necessarily, *methodologically* obliged to stay true to the phenomena, phenomenology ultimately remains metaphysically and ontologically impotent, embracing and bolstering an antirealist philosophy, if not outright aligning itself with idealism. The history of phenomenology is, according to Sparrow, in many ways a history of various attempts to alleviate this difficulty by developing a 'rhetoric of realism':

"The phenomenological attachment to the real requires, yet lacks, metaphysical justification, for such a thing is prohibited by the authority of the phenomena. The lack of justification is therefore filled by the constellation of concepts that includes "immanence," "worldhood," "field," "facticity," "giveness," "*il y a*," "wholly other," "*Lebenswelt*," "pregiven," "wild" or "brute" being, and so forth." (76)

It is easy to recognize here an entire history of attempts to broaden the conception of phenomenology beyond the apparently narrow confines of the principle of all principles. All of these attempts, according to the author, amount to no more than conjuring sessions: "Say the name three times into the mirror of nature and Nature itself will appear in its absolute materiality" (77), notes Sparrow in the slightly brash and willfully iconoclastic manner so characteristic and evocative of a lot of the speculative realism prose.

The second part of the argument, also featuring prominently in the book, is aimed more at pre-empting possible objections to Sparrow's treatment of some of the phenomenologists in his book. If one were, for example, to point to various and numerous places where they do make clear references to pre-subjective nature,[1] Sparrow would answer that we can't, and in fact mustn't take everything a phenomenologist says at face value *as* a phenomenological statement. While this certainly is obviously true, the way Sparrow formulates this distinction ('*Phenomenology* ≠ *Phenomenologist*', 50) leaves a lot to be desired. Besides having the unfortunate effect of quasi-hypostatizing phenomenology (after all, individual authors and their voluntary identification with phenomenology helped create its method, rather than the other way around), this artificial distinction can be seen as, and in fact is, a safeguard against any possibility that phenomenology actually *might* have something to say about reality outside of the thinking/being correlation. Rather than leaving room for such a possibility, however, Sparrow creates a false exclusive choice: either you have nothing to say about reality, in which case you're still operating within phenomenology (and you're not "misunderstanding its limits," 50), or you're lapsing back into naïve realism "for fear of being mistaken for an idealist." (102) Needless to say, it is very difficult for anyone actually working in the phenomenological tradition to accept this disjunction, especially if one is aware of the textual contexts within which Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty or Levinas (Sparrow's four main examples) made and expressed their realist commitments.

[1] For just one random example, cf. Husserl's repeated references to "objective", "primordial Nature" in Hua VIII, p. 436ff.

This, however, is exactly where the problem with Sparrow's treatment of phenomenology lies. Admittedly, this book was not meant to be an exhaustive study on the intricacies of phenomenology's relation to realism, but rather a sweeping view of some of its problems, written in an avowed spirit of pamphlet-style polemic. (ix) The author also (rightfully) assumes that "[n]one of this is likely to convince the committed phenomenologist" nor the "academic who stakes their career on phenomenology's viability." (189) Yet this sounds hopelessly patronizing, because the doubts of the informed readers not convinced by Sparrow's attack on phenomenology are far less likely to be motivated by career worries and far more by an unshakeable feeling that his dismissal of phenomenology '*in einem Sprunge*' is primarily a product of his own philosophical preferences coupled with an insufficiently developed perspective on recent work and developments in phenomenology.

This is perhaps most easily noticeable and demonstrable in the case of Husserl. Sparrow only cites from a very limited number of translated works (often somewhat haphazardly, disregarding their different historical contexts), and only those published in Husserl's lifetime. While this, in itself, is not illegitimate, it certainly is insufficient support for a reading which ought to 'stick' to the entirety of Husserl's thought. This is an especially egregious oversight considering that it has now become almost commonplace in Husserl scholarship to recognize, along *with* Husserl, that the most important part of his life's work still lies in the manuscripts not published in his lifetime.[2] An increasing amount of new information on the later period of Husserl's thought is constantly being discovered and reconstructed and several scholars have already shown, in conclusive ways, that Husserl took the 'speculative' dimension of phenomenology very seriously indeed, and was aware of its importance for his own project.[3] These advancements in phenomenological thought are simply too important and too relevant to the topic at hand to be ignored. Occasionally Sparrow mentions some such contemporary approach, like in the case of Alexander Schnell, but instantly dismisses it because he (Sparrow) "… [t]akes "phenomenological metaphysics" to be an oxymoron." (17) In comparison to this type of argumentation, the occasional glaring error, such as referring to Husserl's 1911 essay as "Phenomenology as Rigorous Science" (106) seems like a very slight and forgivable oversight. While Sparrow generally paints a slightly more favorable picture of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, his treatment of their work and the contemporary scholarship surrounding it is almost equally perfunctory. The only phenomenologist whose work Sparrow seems honestly interested in engaging with is Levinas, but there is simply too little of that in this book to make up for the listed shortcomings. Finally, it doesn't help that Sparrow, in arguing for the inherent

[2] Cf. Husserl's *Briefwechsel* in Dok III/3, p. 90.

[3] For an exhaustive study of Husserl's later work with Eugen Fink, touching heavily on these topics, cf. Bruzina, Ronald (2004): *Edmund Husserl & Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology, 1928–1938*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. A now-classical study documenting Husserl's and Fink's day-to-day wrestling with these problems is found in Cairns, Dorion (1976): *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. There we find useful remarks on the speculative dimension in phenomenology, such as when Fink talks about the necessity of going beyond originary giveness (*Originärgegebenheit*) and towards non-arbitrary 'constructions.' (p. 24f.)

antirealism in phenomenology, sometimes relies on secondary sources the accuracy of which has already been seriously challenged by prominent phenomenology scholars.[4]

After Chapter 2, the tone of the book shifts, and Sparrow offers us overviews of different thinkers, starting with the original four Goldsmiths panelists, and then closing with a panorama of thinkers Sparrow usefully dubs the 'second wave of speculative realism.' (146) The remarks with which he closes his chapter on Graham Harman could be applied to the entire second half of the book, insofar as the author aims neither at a critical reading, nor a full account of any of these thinkers. This seems only fair, given that all the mentioned approaches and variants of speculative realism are still philosophies in progress. Still, the complete lack of any critical perspective might be off-putting to some readers, particularly after trudging through the trenches of the first two chapters. Additionally, the reader will certainly find herself somewhat disappointed at not finding out almost anything about the philosophical position Sparrow himself adopts.

He certainly seems to be closest to the positions adopted by Meillassoux and Harman. Accordingly, Chapters 3 and 4 are the most interesting chapters of the book, although it is unclear just how much of this is owing to the inherent qualities of Meillassoux's and Harman's philosophies, and how much to Sparrow's presentation. Since Meillassoux and Harman develop their conceptions of, respectively, speculative materialism and speculative realism in large part in opposition to classical phenomenology, these chapters are not completely free of repetition, and the reader will often find themselves reading the same arguments and counter-arguments from the earlier chapters again, only this time cast in a slightly different light. This is understandable, since Sparrow's own understanding and presentation of phenomenology, offered in the previous chapters, were obviously heavily influenced and shaped by those of the original speculative realists, whatever the merit of their interpretations of phenomenology might be. When it comes to the positive aspects and contributions of the different speculative philosophies at hand, however, Sparrow's non-critical (and perhaps, on occasion, uncritical) synopsis can only really be as good as the source material would allow him. In the case of Meillassoux, this means we are treated to an admittedly interesting but only half-finished distinction between 'facticity' and 'factiality' (94ff.) which is supposed to lead us beyond the fideism and dogmatic metaphysics of correlationism and install speculative metaphysics in their place. *Knowing*, rather than believing, that uncorrelated, ancestral absolutes are possible is the end goal of speculative metaphysics, and this goal is to be attained not through phenomenological description, but through "a deduction of the necessity of facticity." (101) It is not long, however, before Sparrow is forced to admit that no precise exposition of this hyper-deduction leading to the 'Great Outdoors' is forthcoming, other than through some vague references to intellectual intuition as its method of choice. (104, 109)

[4] I'm referring here specifically to Tom Rockmore's book *Kant and Phenomenology* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011) which Sparrow evokes throughout the first chapter, central to his criticism of phenomenology. For a highly critical review of Rockmore's book, and specifically of his understanding of Husserl, cf. Sebastian Luft's review in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (online)*, 2012.

Sparrow's summary of Meillassoux's thought is clean and eminently readable, however, and represents one of the high points of the book.

More or less the same could be said of his treatment of Graham Harman's speculative realism, or object-oriented philosophy. The chapter opens with an interesting discussion of the phenomenological (Husserlian) concept of intentionality, before once again reiterating that, despite appearances, Husserlian phenomenology cannot be anything other than idealism, and that "[t]he feel of realism in Husserl is no doubt an effect of the rhetoric of concreteness," (123) lest someone be fooled by phenomenology's coy and vivid 'poetics of ambience,' a term coined by Timothy Morton and used by Sparrow as well. (78) While this review is not the place to delve into the details of Harman's employment of phenomenology on his way to a 'Weird Realism,' it must be said that its ultimate result is, at least on Sparrow's presentation, underwhelming. For one thing, it is not immediately obvious that the speculative realist's talk of copper wires, cups, pine trees, numbers, plants, or machines that beckon, glisten, shimmer, etc. isn't just a richer rhetoric of concreteness or a poetics of ambience. Additionally, Harman's original and occasionally obscure position ultimately relies on notions such as sincerity, allure, metaphor, and analogy, and uses them as ontological and metaphysical explanatory devices. While this is a legitimate strategy in itself, it is very difficult to see how such eminently human categories help to deliver us from a 'philosophy of access.' Harman's philosophy does rest on the basic presupposition that the human perspective is not fully eliminable or surpassable, and it also recognizes its own unfinished openness, likening object-oriented philosophy to a kind of a canal beyond which lies the unknown. (136) But all of this sounds very similar to the famed self-avowed openness of phenomenology which Sparrow repeatedly points out as the major source of its inconsistent claims. The reader will find no such critical perspective on Harman's project in Sparrow's book, unfortunately.

The final chapter of the book offers a panoramic view of various philosophers working on, within, or close to speculative realism. Because the chapter only offers quick introductory glances at the work of Iain Hamilton Grant, Ray Brassier, Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, and Jane Bennett, it will suffice to say that Sparrow provides an elegant, sympathetic, and, as far as I know, accurate overview of their respective positions.

Finally, let me make a few brief remarks regarding the structure of the book and its academic apparatus. Each chapter is followed by a series of corresponding endnotes containing both the bibliographic references and the author's additional comments. This decision, however, quickly leads to a cumbersome reading process, with the reader constantly having to leaf between the text itself, and the notes accompanying it. While this decision might occasionally fulfil its purpose of 'freeing up' the text,—especially in the later chapters which often feature consecutive quotations from a single work—it ultimately impairs its readability and seems out of place, particularly in the earlier, critically inclined chapters which rely on primary and secondary textual support, where the reader might want a quicker overview of who claimed what and where, exactly. There also seems to be no need for endnotes, rather than footnotes—the notes themselves are short and to the point, often containing nothing more than a page number. Additionally, the

author might have done well to add a comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book. While the book's Index does offer an initial clue as to where a certain reference might be, some unnecessary detective work is still left to the reader. A complete list of sources (and, perhaps, recommended further readings) would seem to be a particularly good idea for a book such as this one, which presumably seeks to secure more exposure to work aligned with speculative materialism and realism.

Tom Sparrow's *The End of Phenomenology* is a useful book, insofar as it provides the reader with an engaging, accessible overview of the basic figures and ideas behind the speculative materialism/realism 'movement.' Had that been its only, or even main goal, it would probably have turned out very different, and would've been much easier to recommend. As it stands, however, its usefulness, as well as the overall impression it leaves on the reader, is severely undermined by two overly ambitious and insufficiently convincing opening chapters; unfortunately for Sparrow, precisely those two chapters were meant to spell out and defend the book's main thesis: that phenomenology has, or ought to, come to an end. This thesis has already been argued for and defended many times, and often much more convincingly than here. By failing to engage with relevant, contemporary, phenomenological literature, and instead adopting a dismissive approach to it, Sparrow's take on the thesis, unfortunately, never goes beyond mere stipulation.

Where does this leave the book? On the one hand, the philosophers already well-versed in phenomenology will not need this book as an introduction to very standard objections and counter-arguments to it, especially since it engages almost no contemporary literature on the topic. On the other hand, readers interested in finding out more about speculative realism might as well pick up the primary sources, especially considering the fact that much of the literature is very recent, readable, and occasionally even easily accessible online. This book's audience will thus probably be limited to beginners in (continental) philosophy who might want to inform themselves on some recent developments, and have already had their interest piqued by speculative realism.

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