



### Book Review

## The End of Phenomenology

Tom Sparrow. (2014). *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh Press. Hard Cover (197 pages + i–xvi); also available in webready PDF, paperback, and epub.

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by **Thomas Nenon**

In the Preface to this book, Sparrow traces its original impetus back to a former professor's suggestion that he in due course publish a "pamphlet-style polemic called, perhaps, *Against Phenomenology*" (p. ix), and in the concluding chapter he expresses the hope that readers will not find it "too crass" if he ends the book with the "same spirit of polemic with which I began" (p. 185).

Indeed, much of the Introduction and the following two chapters does retain that style and spirit, expressing frustration with the lack of unanimity about the nature, methods and topics of phenomenology, and rehearsing some commonplace objections to it. The objections outlined in this book are those raised by several scholars who have come to be grouped together under the label "Speculative Realism" – despite the fact that most of them have reservations about that title as a description of their own work, and even though Sparrow admits that it is in the end no clearer actually than the term "phenomenology" (p. 20). In this regard, the book can also be seen as a brief introduction to some general themes from speculative realism. As Sparrow points out, though, what the writers subsumed under each of the general headings "phenomenology" and "speculative realism" most share is that from which they differentiate themselves. For phenomenologists, it would be philosophers and other theorists who, in their estimation, orient themselves too narrowly and uncritically on methodologies modelled on modern natural science; for speculative realists, it would be phenomenologists and others committed to a version of what, following Quentin Meillassoux, they call "correlationism".

The chapters that follow Sparrow's general indictments of the fundamental shortcomings of phenomenology and its limitations as a method for contemporary philosophizing are primarily summaries of the theoretical standpoints of some of the main figures associated with speculative realism, with particular emphasis on the points of intersection and differences between them and phenomenology. Chapter 3 deals with Meillassoux, Chapter 4 introduces some prominent themes in the work of Graham Harman, and Chapter 5 describes the work of Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Timothy Morton, Ion Bagost, and Jane Bennett. Sparrow ends the book with a brief concluding chapter that summarizes the main points he is attempting to establish about the end of phenomenology in a much more systematic and clearer way than in the Preface or either of the first two chapters. There, in a series of points, he lays out the numerous reservations he has about phenomenology, citing first Husserl's lack of clarity in the formulation of his own project, then Husserl's increasing alignment with a form of transcendental idealism (in the eyes of Sparrow and the other speculative realists, his gravest mistake), from which many of his followers have failed to distance themselves, then the subsequent dissipation of any clear agreement about what differentiates phenomenological from non-phenomenological philosophy and the corresponding loss of a clear principle or set of principles that would guide it, and, finally, the move to naturalize phenomenology that, in Sparrow's view, undermines phenomenology's greatest strength, which was its role as a necessary corrective to an excessive reliance on the principles and assumptions of modern

natural science. He notes that the term “end” in the title is deliberately ambiguous, referring simultaneously to phenomenology’s unsuitability for current philosophers who want to find a better way to approach traditional ontological questions about the nature of reality itself, the conflict between phenomenological methodology and theologically inclined thinkers who want to go beyond a philosophy of immanence, and also to a call back to the original impetus and aims of phenomenology as an antidote to uncritical and overly narrow reliance on the model of the natural sciences as the sole or primary access to the world.

Throughout the Introduction and the five main chapters, it is above all Husserl who comes in for the strongest criticism as an idealist or “correlationist” whose philosophical approach downplays or eliminates a robust recognition of the reality and independence of the world from human knowers. Thus it is somewhat surprising when Sparrow in the end calls for a “return to the work of Husserl in order to finalize what Husserl never could: a precise phenomenological method to complement the method of science” (p. 188). Meanwhile, however, and without a renewed or any clearer description of phenomenological method, Sparrow sees “phenomenology” as an almost empty signification. A further tension he mentions in the Conclusion but develops more clearly in Chapters 1 and 2 is the problem of how a kind of philosophy that purports to be founded on direct experience and evidence can be reconciled with the attempt by several key figures in French phenomenology to address otherness and, more specifically, that which by definition is beyond experience, namely the in every sense completely transcendent dimension of the divine.

Chapters 3 through 5 demonstrate how the work of the “speculative realists” can be seen as different responses and alternatives to various phenomenologists, and in particular to Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas. Sparrow shows how, for several of them, their work arises in part with inspiration from developments within phenomenology that they extend in a way that now positions them in opposition to the guiding tendencies of classical phenomenology, and in particular to what they see as its idealism and its over-emphasis on how things appear to human knowers. The question of how to think of “the real” that phenomenological philosophy purportedly cannot handle is very different for different members of this group. For Meillassoux, it is the things described in modern mathematical science, particularly physics. For Harman, it is the in-itselfness of objects and their inner lives that escape us. For others, it might be the absolute either of more or less traditional theology or in Hegel or Schelling. Sparrow’s summaries of their positions are necessarily painted with broad strokes and limit themselves to description more than critical analysis, so that the book provides the reader with some general directions to pursue but is not intended as an in-depth philosophical analysis of these

philosophers’ works.

From my own standpoint as a fairly orthodox transcendental philosopher who still finds many insights from Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger compelling, I must confess that I find some of this book’s characterizations of their positions, in particular those of Husserl, rather puzzling. Of course, it is not unusual for philosophers to present somewhat oversimplified views of their predecessors as the critical starting points for developing their own original positions. Aristotle’s treatment of Plato and the Presocratics can be seen as a classic example of that tendency, and Heidegger’s and Levinas’s depictions of Husserl’s views are examples within the phenomenological tradition. But if “correlationism” is supposed to be the view that only those things are real that are the correlates of actual human intentional experiences – and, in particular, actual human perceptual experiences – then, according to my reading, neither Kant, Husserl nor Heidegger is anywhere close to being a correlationist. Kant certainly took himself to be providing a philosophical framework that is consistent with Newtonian physics, and physics along Newtonian lines posits all sort of entities that have never been the direct object of human perception. When Kant calls them appearances in a philosophical instead of an empirical sense, he is just making clear that we cannot conceive of them as not existing in space and time and without thinking of them in terms of categories such as causality. In fact, I cannot think of any major figure who has held a correlationist view since the 18th century and pre-Kantian philosophy. What transcendental philosophers, including Husserl, do believe is that, whenever we have good reason to claim that something is, has been, or will at some time be actual, that belief needs to be founded on evidence. In everyday life, if I come home and see that things have been rearranged in my absence, I can reasonably conclude that someone else must have been there even though I did not see them enter or leave. Similarly, when we observe certain features of the earth or the universe and have learned something about the laws governing physical changes through geology or physics, then we can reasonably conclude things about what must have happened on earth and in the universe long before the time when we have good evidence to believe that there were any human beings around to witness those things directly. What transcendental philosophy asks is what fundamental assumptions we must make if we are going to undertake geology or physics as sciences at all to help us find out what kinds of things there are, what laws govern their changes, and what would count as the best scientific evidence of scientific beliefs about them.

From a transcendental standpoint, it sounds to me like Meillassoux’s definition of the real is a very strong, but narrow, form of correlationism. It says that what there really is are the things that are the correlates of true statements in modern mathematically oriented physical

sciences. If we apply Meillassoux's confrontation of the problem of "ancestrality" to his own philosophical account of what there is, the problem seems to be worse than it is for classical phenomenology on a correlationist reading. Instead of having a world that is only as old as human beings, we would have a world that is only as old as modern mathematical physics. That is a much shorter span than even the creationists take to be the age of the universe. This form of correlationism is "narrow", because it would exclude all the things that we know through everyday experience, e.g. that the traffic light really is red and that we should stop at a red light. It really is often red, even though some human beings cannot see red or even see at all. We know that the meaning of the term "red" implicitly relates to what normal human beings can see under normal conditions, but we also still know that some things really are red and others are not. We also know that some things really are chairs, which is why we walk over to sit on them, and we know they were chairs even before we sat on them or even saw them. This is why Heidegger uses the term "*entdecken* [discover]" for this kind of recognition, and Husserl in *Ideas II* is making just this same point about objects encountered in the personalistic attitude as well. So Harman's view about "tool-being" is one that not only Heidegger, but Husserl too, would agree with. Yet it does not seem to be something that would fit Meillassoux's criterion for reality. Part of Husserl's entire phenomenological project was intended to combat precisely this kind of narrowness by using a two-fold strategy that Heidegger to some extent employs as well. First of all, Husserl's phenomenology appeals to our everyday experience of things to show that reality is much richer than notions of reality and truth predicated just on the natural sciences would permit, and, secondly, it argues that the natural sciences themselves are ways of approaching and grasping reality that do extend what we know about natural objects in very powerful ways, but that these new kinds of natural objects emerge only as the correlates of the modern scientific enterprise. That is why we can undertake a philosophical genealogy of this modern scientific or naturalistic attitude itself.

The richness of our experience for Husserl includes not just real objects, physical objects, but the kinds of items and relationships described in formal logic and mathematics, which was the point of Husserl's critique of psychologism. That does not make physically real, spatio-temporally located objects any less real. To ascribe the kind of correlationism to Husserl that at least some if not all of the speculative realists attribute to him would be equivalent to attributing to him not just a fairly naïve form of idealism, but psychologism as well, since numbers and the laws of mathematics would then be aspects of human thinking rather than the atemporal objects of human thinking.

The richness of the objects we encounter in themselves, their "concreteness", also involves much more than

Sparrow seems to associate with the term "concrete". "Concrete" for Husserl means not just that the objects we encounter in our daily lives are located in space and time and have some genuine properties that we as embodied agents discover in our perceptions of them, but that they also come endowed with practical and aesthetic predicates. The opposite of concrete objects for Husserl in *Ideas II*, for instance, are the strictly theoretical or naturalistically conceived "abstract" objects. In everyday human life, when we recognize things around us, we form intentions not just about their shapes, colours, weights, and temperatures, but also about whether they are likely to fit or obstruct our purposes, whether they are going to taste good or bad, lead to pleasant or unpleasant experiences, whether they are beautiful or repulsive, and many other things. Moreover, all these intentions can be confirmed or disappointed in the further course of experience, and this can happen either directly or indirectly, e.g. through the testimony or experiences of others or through causal inferences. So, in the end, I agree with Sparrow that Husserl remains a good place to start for a philosophical approach that can handle the richness of our encounters with all sorts of things that we discover really do exist and really do have specific kinds of properties, affordances, and aesthetic aspects, and that never cease to surprise and often disappoint us. As more of the writings that remained unpublished during Husserl's lifetime have become available over the past few decades, some of the one-sided readings of him as a mere philosopher of reflection trapped in the theoretical attitude – caricatures that critical readers of him within the phenomenological tradition such as Heidegger or Levinas have encouraged as well – are receding.

What Husserl and transcendental phenomenologists cannot claim to say as philosophers is which individual things are real, handy, tasty, or beautiful. Transcendental philosophers reflect on what is involved in making those kinds of claims and what kinds of experiences would validate them. Those are what Husserl calls "eidetic structures", what Heidegger in *Being and Time* refers to as "categories" for things that are not Dasein and "existentials" for Dasein. This is the whole thrust of the phenomenological reduction, namely the recognition that philosophers can reflect on the *structures* of, or invariant features of, different kinds of experiences, and of the contexts within which different kinds of objects can show themselves or seem to show themselves or even elude us. Examples of these kinds of objects include everyday use objects, artworks, other people as minded agents or persons, numbers, the laws of logic, and a whole range of other possible things. But our knowledge about which of them are genuine and what they are like comes to us not through philosophy, but through various kinds of experiences – including both everyday and scientific experience. As human beings, we do have those experiences that we can reflect upon as philosophers, but as philosophers we reflect

only on the structures of those experience and do not attempt to make claims that only the experiences themselves can ground.

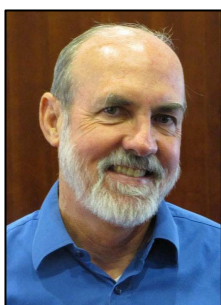
Now, if this way of reading Husserl and certain other phenomenologists is correct, then much of what they do is consistent with some of the aims of at least some of the speculative realists, but many of the speculative realists' critiques of phenomenology fall short. To be sure, there is still plenty of room to criticize Husserl with regard to the clarity of his writings and the terminology he used to characterize his positions. As Heidegger and others after him recognized, Husserl's self-professed allegiance to transcendental philosophy in the Cartesian tradition and the terminology of modern philosophy he inherits to describe his position – terms like subjectivity,

consciousness, self-consciousness, idealism – can easily give rise to just the kinds of readings that I have tried to argue above fall short of the strongest way to understand his project. Sparrow is certainly also correct that there is no clear agreement among people professing to be phenomenologists about what phenomenological method exactly is, just as there is no clear agreement among philosophers in general about what exactly is and is not philosophy. If it is not clear what it is, then it is not clear what parts or aspects of it are over either. I think that, whether intentionally or not, one thing Sparrow's book shows us is that there is still much that is worth thinking about and learning from many thinkers who have taken themselves to be involved in the phenomenological tradition, including some of those figures Sparrow counts among the speculative realists.

### Referencing Format

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