

Tom Sparrow. *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism.* Edinburgh University Press 2014. 216 pp. \$120.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780748684823); \$34.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780748684830).

In *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism*, Tom Sparrow acts as our modest Virgil, guiding the uninitiated through the diverse levels and strange spaces of the speculative realist movement, charting territory that is at once familiar and uncanny. But before we arrive at this destination, Sparrow takes us back through the history of phenomenology to survey the ground that's led us to the weird vistas of speculative realism. Sparrow's aim is twofold: first, to prove that the unifying methodological commitments of phenomenology bar phenomenologists from making realist metaphysical claims about the world, despite the discipline's continual professions to the contrary, assertions which, as Sparrow ably shows, are merely rhetorical. And second, to convey how speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy build from this *aporia* in phenomenology to fulfill the metaphysical aspirations that phenomenology's furtive idealism prevent it from realizing. Though the movement has provoked a minor backlash among phenomenologists, whose objections have ranged from the nuanced and sophisticated to the reactionary bluster of self-preservation, Sparrow skillfully demonstrates that the speculative turn is, in certain respects, an outgrowth of phenomenology, one that can truly get us "back to the things themselves." As an account of how it "mines and adapts the resources of phenomenology," the work does not offer a comprehensive primer or assessment of speculative realism (12). However, while the scope of his treatment of the new realism is narrowed by the intent to reveal its relation to phenomenology, Sparrow's incisive reading successfully shows that speculative realism is accomplishing what phenomenology, by definition, never could.

Over the years, the criteria for what might properly be called phenomenology have become so diluted that any poetic description of lived experience can be labeled phenomenological. Phenomenology's increasing popularity as a style of expression has resulted in its diminishing worth as a distinct philosophical method. Just as Jean-Paul Sartre fought in the late 40s to stem the adulteration of existentialism that resulted from the term's overuse and misapplication in popular culture, Sparrow offers a similar reassessment of phenomenology's core principles and methodological requirements to clarifying what counts as authentic phenomenology. Ultimately, this is aimed at demarcating the limitations of phenomenology, to making clear what remains outside of its purview, namely, metaphysical realism. Through a meticulous examination of its corpus, Sparrow shows that phenomenology consistently maintains—beginning with Husserl's foundations, through the existential transformations of Heidegger and Sartre, to the "carnal" phenomenologies of Levinas and Merleau-Ponty—a form of idealism that limits it to an appraisal of the phenomena that appear to human consciousness. Bound by these parameters, phenomenology can only justify claims about what is "presented immanently to consciousness" and is therefore "prohibited from making realist metaphysical commitments" (75, xiv). Despite pretensions to being the foremost philosophical means of accessing the concrete world, "what phenomenology actually delivers," Sparrow writes, is the "Kantian world for-us, not the world of the real or material things as they are in themselves" (1). If we are to take its fundamental methodological requirements seriously, then phenomenology "must lead necessarily to either antirealism or metaphysical agnosticism" (3). Simply put, "phenomenology cannot deliver realism of any kind" (61). "Only speculative realism" can fulfill the promise of phenomenology by getting "us out of Kant's shadow" and "back to the things themselves" (1). This reading of the tradition has particularly compelling implications for phenomenology's recent

theological turn, a development that attests to a renaissance of metaphysics in continental philosophy, one that, if Sparrow is right, entails a departure from phenomenology. Following his rigorous analysis of phenomenology's latent idealism, Sparrow examines how the work of two leading speculative realists, Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman, significantly engages with phenomenology. He then concludes the volume with a brief overview of the speculative realism of Iain Hamilton Grant and Ray Brassier, as well as the "second wave" of object-oriented philosophy led by Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, and Jane Bennett.

Sparrow shows that, though these thinkers may not forward a coordinated and standardized set of principles, they are, without question, charting a new course for continental philosophy, impelled by a hunger, not merely for the next intellectual fad, but for novelty in philosophy. And this insistence on novelty is not simply for its own sake, akin to an entrepreneur's misplaced reverence for innovation, but is compelled by the noblest imperatives of philosophy. There's a shared feeling among the new realists that continental philosophy has become something like a character out of Beckett, ashen, undead, and ensnared in a cycle of routines perpetually reperformed in an effort to produce meaning where none has long since existed, where there was perhaps none to begin with. This collective dissatisfaction with the profession has given rise to speculative realism's characteristic 'make it new' ethos and to an enthusiastic revival of metaphysics after its demise. For example, the recently released description of a new series of works to be published by Edinburgh University Press and edited by the leading lights of speculative realism is accompanied by a call to action: "the time is now for a renaissance in new ontologies...to move beyond the stale hermeneutics and phenomenologies of the past." Similarly, Sparrow contends that "phenomenology has morphed into a zombie;" though "it is extremely active," it lacks "philosophical vitality" (187). It can't go on, and yet, it is as though it must. Those Sparrow identifies with object-oriented ontology and the new realism actively resist the intellectual inertia of "zombie phenomenology" by deploying the revivifying potential of speculation.

Among the many strengths of the book is the direct, immediate, and accessible style of Sparrow's writing, which has no doubt been influenced by the blogosphere where speculative realism has gained a foothold and been free to develop outside the fusty conventions of academic discourse. Sparrow discards the often baroque poetics of professional philosophy, writing in a fresh and energetic voice that manages to employ rigor without tedium. The "intrepid style" of Sparrow's writing is one of the many virtues of the new dispensation exemplified in the text. Another is the irreverent manner of Sparrow's approach to the phenomenological tradition, not unlike a sectarian who's grown dissatisfied with formerly held dogmas that have ceased to meet the needs of its adherents. Though Sparrow is critical of phenomenology, his tone is never derisive. When he passes judgment on phenomenology, it's with an eye toward realizing its essential aims, not to mock or discredit it. Like Harman, Sparrow offers adept if unconventional interpretations of phenomenology's primary texts to accomplish this and, in the process, breathes new life into a field that's become, let's be honest, a bit uninspired.

We may be tempted to dismiss Sparrow's titular contention that "phenomenology...has come to an end," (51) regarding it as merely the newest apocalyptic swing of the academic pendulum, preceded by the end of history, art, metaphysics, God, and the secular (51). And indeed, Sparrow's interment of phenomenology is predicated on the reanimation of metaphysics, even before the ink has dried on the profuse eulogies intended to codify its demise. As one ends, another returns. Perhaps

this can provide some consolation to phenomenologists vexed by the “death of phenomenology”—here, the dead don’t stay dead long (xi). However, it would be a mistake to reject Sparrow’s account as simply the latest expression of the penchant for crises in continental thought, or to oversimplify what such an “end” entails, for, as with the end of metaphysics, this is not a matter of sheer cessation. It is, rather, a kind of “living death” (xi). Ultimately, Sparrow’s recent volume helps us to navigate and understand the epistemological rupture currently underway in continental philosophy, one that is sure to significantly reorient its trajectory. As our Virgil amid the shades, Sparrow establishes the lay of this strange new land, marking the path we’ve arrived by, and enabling us to find surer footing along the diverse routes that lie ahead.

Andrew Ball, Lindenwood University