The content of Tom Sparrow’s book, *Plastic Bodies: Rebuilding Sensation after Phenomenology*, is in many ways just as provocative as the title—but primarily in the sense that it is very likely to spark a series of conflicting emotions and discussions amongst communities of academics and/or practitioners from diverse theoretical backgrounds. In taking an explicitly speculative route towards a theory of sensation, for reasons he expounds upon in depth, Sparrow pushes a lineage of phenomenological philosophers—thinkers to which he admits an undeniable theoretical indebtedness—farther than he suggests a strictly phenomenological perspective and/or method capable of pursuing on its own terms. While the finer details and assumptions leading up to this particular proposal could certainly be challenged on several fronts, Sparrow’s highly astute insights and notably articulate reasons for suggesting such a thesis will no doubt prove an invaluable contribution to any project engaging with contemporary issues in mind/body studies, while also providing a novel take on the relationship between theory, method and social practice in general. And while the title of the book might seem like nothing short of a direct challenge to the tradition of phenomenology in general, the earnestness and deliberate nature with which Sparrow engages phenomenological theory throughout the text evinces a project determined to be as pragmatically orientated as it is theoretically sound—a undoubtedly tall task but one with which any dedicated reader of the history of phenomenology is likely to find engaging.

Catherine Malabou provides a particularly noteworthy foreword for the book, within which she describes the project Sparrow takes up here as: “Halfway between Husserl and Simondon, Merleau-Ponty and James, Levinas, Deleuze, and Dewey, Sparrow invites us to question this new dimension where the body is no longer the flesh” (pg. 20). She goes on to add that the concept of “plastic disembodiment is presented [here] as a new economy of the sensible,” one that additionally demands a theoretical reworking of traditional concepts such as physical matter and embodiment (pg. 20). But what exactly is this “new dimension” and why does Sparrow insist something beyond phenomenology is necessary in order to articulate it? Moreover, what does Sparrow propose instead of phenomenology in order to accomplish this?

In short, Sparrow conceives this dimension as sensation in the broadest sense of the term, which he positions against concepts such as sense-
perception and others that either theoretically privilege perception over sensation or conflate the two into a single notion. According to Sparrow, sensation is “best regarded as the precondition of relation; it is what enables bodies to enter into and exit alliances” (pg. 63). This sense of sensation is said to be produced from collisions between objects as much as individual people, without necessarily privileging prior sets of relations over any potentially new ones. To be sure, a central concern here for Sparrow is how a singular body becomes orientated by and towards both impersonal objects and other bodies and persons, which can all both potentially predate and/or affect it and yet also in turn be affected by it. For him, moreover, such a concern can only be addressed speculatively as opposed to phenomenologically, at least insofar as methods labeled phenomenological are constituted primarily through perceptual dimensions of consciousness, because sensation is considered something that cannot be fully given in perception. The notion of sensation Sparrow constructs here is in fact described as “pre-perceptual, pre-conceptual, and prepersonal, and its diachrony introduces a fundamental instability into the world of perception” (pg. 39). As such, many of the conventional implementations of phenomenology, whereby it is conceived as something like the systematic study of structures of consciousness, are suggested as coming up short of being able to access any ontological dimensions that might exist beyond that which can be given perceptually to an individual subject, transcendental or otherwise.

To aid in this general argument, Sparrow frames Merleau-Ponty and Levinas as representing two distinct theoretical projects of embodiment, with each of which attempting to build upon the Husserlian phenomenological project by ending up with their own respective version of a sort of corporeal ontology. Merleau-Ponty starts, for example, in both *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Structure of Behavior*, with a thesis that the object-subject distinction is fundamentally founded in embodied perception, and thus so is the structure of the life-world and its relationship to the social in general. But later in his life, especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he alludes to this assumption as perhaps being a conceptual mistake: “The problems posed in *Ph.P.* are insoluble because I start there from the ‘consciousness’-‘object’ distinction” (1969, pg. 200). Even for Merleau-Ponty, therefore, particularly in his later writings, any perspective that assumes an ontological primacy of some notion of pure consciousness will not succeed in making sense of how certain individuated styles of sensations and embodied perceptual habits might emerge out of *a priori* social and natural worlds full of ambiguity. As Sparrow describes: