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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ATTEMPT AT UNDERSTANDING OTHERNESS

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Abstract: *The phenomenology of otherness is not satisfied with the reductionist definitions of the classical anthropological conceptions. The latter have identified the essence of man in his rationality, morality, createdness, or the possibility of moral and aesthetic self-perfection. The monolithic definition of human essence, based on uniform criteria, seems today one-sided and outdated. The parallel effects of cultural diversification, the pluralized political and social system, and multilingualism have directly and inevitably confronted us with otherness and strangeness. We could even say that we can understand our identity primarily through the experience of otherness. We will reach our conclusions related to the phenomenological constitutive of otherness by way of the interpretation of the relevant ideas of Baudrillad, Guillaume and Lévinas.*

Key words: *Otherness, Alterity, Phenomenology, Gaze, Levinas*

1. Historical Occurrences of Otherness

"...alterity is always a challenge..." (Baudrillard and Guillaume, 2002, p. 13)

From a historical-philosophical point of view, the issue of otherness had the most interesting development among the problems of philosophy. As a matter of philosophical principle, alterity was a priori excluded from Greek cosmogony. Greek philosophers discussing the relationship between the *One* and the *Many* always sympathized with the *One*, banishing multiplicity and the changeable/change to an illusory world, or subordinating it to the idea of a holistically understood *Oneness*.[2] Transitory being, or any existence deviating from the norm of unity, did not have a substantial ground of being, and as such was unworthy of philosophical reflection.

Aristotle, however, was less faithful to the pre-Socratic and Platonic theory of oneness. In his *Metaphysics*, he takes the first step from existence toward beings on the road of Western thought, fraught by the "forgetfulness of Being". When saying that we can speak in four ways about being, he implicitly refers to the heterogeneity of existence. Nevertheless, Western philosophy did not deal with the obvious fact of alterity for centuries.

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[2] In Plato's cosmology, perfect being is an emanation of the Demiurge's goodness. Since this is unitary, it excludes otherness. Thus, the androgynous ancestors of humans could not have had any knowledge of the suffering associated with the I-You difference in an imaginary prehistoric state.

Otherness had no place within the monolingual, hermetically constructed Greek civilization. The significance of the Greek-barbarian duality was rather ethical and cultural-theoretical than phenomenological. Medieval Christianity did not only ignore the issue of alterity, but also excluded any standpoint divergent from the official canons.[3] However, even modernity was not any more indulgent with otherness. In its exclusivist rhetoric built on great narratives, it brought into discussion mutually alien categories claiming exclusive validity, which could not contain each other according to their essential nature.

Nevertheless, the ignorance of alterity within certain cultural topoi is not as clear as it might seem. More specifically: we can only identify in these topoi the lack of a well-defined experience of otherness. We cannot speak of an assumed alterity until otherness is included by Western consciousness in the category of the "radically different". According to the value categories built on dichotomies, the opposite of a certain category should not be viewed as the alterity of the former, since it lacks the consubstantiality on the basis of which these ontological differences can be established. Consequently, in the modern period, man could not be viewed as the alterity of God, in the same way in which good was not treated as the alterity, but as the mere opposite of evil. The disjunction of man and God, respectively of good and evil represented a radical opposition, and thus did not permit for the emergence of value categories associated with thinking through one of the members of the pair and stemming from it, but referring to the other member of the pair. Alterity only emerges where the acting and creating consciousness becomes aware of itself as a relational being in its projection into the Other. Thus, alterity is always based on the projection of my selfhood into the gaze, the words and the acts of the Other, or in the recognition of my own essence within the identity of the Other.

Alterity is rooted in my selfhood: it is a reality stemming from my essence, or at least representing itself on the level of self-understanding as an elemental constituent of my self-knowledge, or even of my entire identity.

Modernity was not only incapable of dealing with the issue of alterity, but also increasingly distanced itself from its essence.[4] Although the diversification of cultural possibilities, the encounter of alien civilizations, and the boom of abstract thinking confronted European man with the *Other*, it did not clarify the phenomenality of *otherness*. In other words, up until Nietzsche, Western man was incapable of processing the identity of its selfhood projected within the Other.

2. Phenomenology and the Classical Anthropological Conceptions of Selfhood

Phenomenology is not satisfied with the reductionist definitions of classical anthropological conceptions that identified human essence with rationality, morality, createdness, or the possibility of moral and aesthetic improvement. The monolithic definition of human essence according to uniform criteria seems one-sided and outdated today. The parallel prevalence of cultural diversification, the pluralization of political regimes and social systems, and multilingualism have directly and unavoidably

[3] From a different perspective, one could say that it was these closed civilizations that most spectacularly included alterity, although in a negative regard, as a group of phenomena radically different from their essence and normativity, which they sought to eliminate.

[4] My arguments here proceed from the paradigms laid down in the essay collection entitled *The Faces of Alterity* (Jean Baudrillard–Marc Guillaume: *Figuri ale alterității.* Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2002).

confronted us with alterity and strangeness. Thus, one could even say that we can comprehend our own identity primarily through the experience of otherness.

The issue of otherness was overlooked by the paradigms of modernity. Developed from the scholastic theological approach, the modern outlook was exclusivist, intolerant, and radical. Insofar as it thought in precise value categories, it excluded the possibility of opposing values, solutions, and alternatives. However, one cannot speak about alterity in a culture without alternatives.

In this paper, I will argue that our selfhood is not a self-enclosed and hermetic reality that we could exhaust with epistemological, ontological, and anthropological categories, but an open and dynamic world endowed with the potential for change. Furthermore, I will also present the relevant paradigm of contemporary phenomenology, according to which our postmodern world does not view alterity as a heterogeneous sphere separated and opposed to my selfhood, but conceives of human identity amidst its possibilities of confrontation with alterity. In this respect, it is problematic to what degree alterity preserves the fact of strangeness rooted in the separateness from my own self, as is the extent to which we can still speak of an autonomous sense of identity in the context of this humanistic consubstantiality. The appropriated and ontically and ontologically assumed character of otherness opens up the space for a new type of identity constitution, as the uniformity and internal cohesion becomes problematic, since the infiltration of alterity into the self-identical is burdened with the suspicion of the schizophrenic self.

3. Levinasian Constitution of Alterity

Whenever our self turns in on itself, subjecting its identity to criticism, it views itself along with an *alter ego*, coexisting with, but separated from it through its corporeality and spirituality. Through the differentiation of our personal identity from the other, the original experience of the *self* and the *other* represents one of the basic problems of phenomenological thought. As soon as I recognize the ontological separateness of myself from others through perceiving the other, I also simultaneously realize my anthropological kinship with the other, and the problem of *alterity* becomes a valuable touchstone for understanding my own identity.

The personalist phenomenology of Emmanuel Lévinas is about the role of the other in approaching my own personal self and the effects of the “me-you” dialectical relationship on my selfhood. Lévinasian personalism deduces all aspects of the phenomenal manifestation of human identity and its actual and potential attitudes to God and his likeness, the other man, to the ontological totality, to the rationality and institutions of Western culture, and to the metaphysical dimensions (time, death, and the transcendental) from the dialectical character of the “me-you” relationship.

Lévinas conceived of the relationalist approach of human essence within the philosophical contribution of the “me-you” relationship, without subordinating it to the ontological dimensions. Going beyond the naivety of the epistemological and metaphysical dualism of the *cogito*, he viewed the individual not merely as thinking and contemplating being, but as a dramatic being-in-the-world that directly participates in the flow of life events. According to Lévinas, what we think and feel is an authentic and direct creating factor of our identity.

Each person is the exclusive creator, experiencing subject and re-interpreter of her own life story[5], experiencing the personal character of her own relationship to the world through the modalities of being together. I exist through my awareness of the other, letting his person delimit my ego, since my confrontation with otherness does not usually carry any threat constraining my ego, but on the contrary, a perspective for self-understanding. The hermeneutically relevant idea of the meaningfulness of alterity as a starting point for interpreting my selfhood and its instrumental functionality repeatedly appears in the works of Lévinas. To put it briefly: paradoxically, otherness represents the mirror in which I can understand my own being through the awareness of differentiation. In the phenomenology of Lévinas, when on the way to my selfhood, I have to repeatedly stop at the alterity reflected in the gaze of the Other, representing, in fact, my own otherness.

Man is the being capable of understanding the value in the uniqueness of other persons. Our potential or actual relationship with the other hides the intention to understand otherness, transcending the competence of our everyday interpretive skills. First of all, beyond mere curiosity, any approach towards alterity also requires sympathy and love. Furthermore, we even have to realize the fact that we cannot hold possession of the other as a pure concept. He is given in the modality of existence, and as such, he is also relevant. Thus, we unfold our relationship to otherness as we are letting be the original separateness and autonomy of the other; through removing the metaphysical exclusivity from Heidegger's *Sein-lassen* ("letting-be") and turning it into a touchstone for approaching alterity (otherness) in the Lévinasian sense.

Lévinas' theory of alterity is also interesting from the perspective of the epistemology of selfhood, since it leads us to questions such as: how can I come to know myself in the mirror of the Other's identity? What does the autonomy of his being represent beyond its ontological dimension? And how can I go beyond the conceptuality covering its essence in my understanding of alterity?

These questions are treated by Lévinas through discussing issues such as the gaze, the identity, and the ethics of the Other, as well as by means of addressing the metaphysical reality of death. What does it mean to understand the Other? It is to assume his gaze and to talk to him. Addressing someone puts me in an original relationship that does not subject the realized uniqueness of the Other to the authority of rigid concept, but represents the condition of the communion in the vicinity of her existence. The relationship to her has the necessary character of addressing someone. It is impossible to relate to the Other while making abstraction from the linguistic articulation of his thoughts. Through expressing my ideas, I enter the world of collectively recognized and accepted meanings, becoming the common subject of a community based on a common semantic content.[6]

[5] The main theses of Sartre's existentialism are quite close to Lévinas' own ideas. If we deduct the idea of "absolute freedom is absolute responsibility" from Sartre's philosophy of freedom, we encounter the categories of choice, self-interpretation and the search for identity. The essential difference between the views of these two philosophers consists in the way in which they interpret the effects of the Other upon my identity, as well as in the openness of the individual towards transcendence. While for Sartre "hell is other people", and he views our contemporary world, similarly to Heidegger, as the age of vanished gods, lacking transcendent values, the ontology of Lévinas carries the hope of rehabilitating transcendent authority.

[6] The communitarian consequence of the commonly held semantic dimension radically differs from the pathological mode of existence that denies community and destroys common values. In this respect, only a socially balanced selfhood can become the eminent subject of the ontology of alterity.

The ontological characteristics of our attitude towards otherness also impose ethical conditions upon the potential relationships. Originally, alterity is exposed to my will. I can deny it violently, take possession of it, or examine it. Our interpersonal selfhood represents a qualitative effect of the dynamics involved in our relationships with the Other. Consumer selfhood is almost instinctively intent upon ownership. This possessing mode of existence always denies, to a certain extent, any entity taken as a whole. Thus, the owning relationship objectifies and degrades entities to the level of inert instrumentality that is to be owned. We expect from the object that we own to surrender itself and to stand at our disposal, in order for us to exert power over it. Nevertheless, objectual existence lies far from the nature of personhood. It is true that sight also has a subordinating and expropriatory effect, but insofar as the object assumes the uncoveredness of standing before my gaze, I no longer own it.[7]

This is how Lévinas characterizes the understanding of the Other's openness: "He does not enter entirely into the opening of being in which I already stand as in the field of my freedom. It is not in terms of being in general that he comes toward me. Everything from him that comes to me in terms of being in general certainly offers itself to my understanding and my possession. I understand him in terms of his history, his environment, his habits. What escapes understanding in him is himself, the being. I cannot deny him partially, in violence, by grasping him in terms of being in general, and by possessing him. The other is the only being whose negation can be declared only as total: a murder" (Levinas, 2000, p. 18). One can also observe deniability of the Other's denial, stemming from his proximity to my being: I can only relate to the existence of a subject with a gaze in the full sense of the ontological relation's possibility. Insofar as I look into the eyes of the Other, I meet his essence, or the human value hidden in the depth of his identity that I relate, even unwittingly, to my own selfhood, and I can disregard its value even in the mode of the most radical denial. The denied Other is an annulled existence, during whose destruction I also ravage a certain sphere of my own human dimension. However, I cannot deny the Other within the face-to-face relationship, and this is why dialogues have a community-constituting value.

The Other's gaze also offers the possibility for the experience of seeing, hearing, and addressing someone. We already know that the encounter of the gaze, i.e. the authenticity of the Other's personhood eliminates the destructive impetus directed at his or her destruction, but it also casts doubt upon the ontical consequences of perceiving the gaze. How can I appear as a gaze for myself, and in what sense do we understand our relationship to the other as a potentiality opening itself towards totality? Lévinas concludes his essay entitled *Is Ontology Fundamental?* with the following statement: "the human only lends itself to a relation that is not a power" (Levinas, 2000, p. 19).

Through dealing with the issue of the Ego, Lévinas has transcended the classical stances of the philosophy of the ego and the Cartesian theses arriving at subjectivity from the *cogito* that loses its Ego-constituting basis, as he deduces the Ego from the play of discourses unfolding within the interactive world of alter-Egos. We can also recognize the self existing as an individuality within the relational existence: "To seek the /as a singularity within a totality made up of relationships between singularities that cannot be

[7] There is a serious metaphysical difference between the Gaze and observation. The observed thing remains in the hiddenness of its ontological dimension, maintaining its mysterious character before conceptual thought, as the observed entity is degraded into an ontically existent object brought before rational theses. The person cannot be objectified even by psychology.

subsumed under a concept is to ask whether a living person does not have the power to judge the history in which he is involved…" (Levinas, 2000, p. 33).

Through the communicative factors of language,[8] reason, and the gaze, selfhood conceived of as individuality brings to the surface the *common* reality (and values) of the individuals existing in ontical separation. In order to gain expression, these values make use of our openness towards otherness, as well as of our inherent alterity and duality. The transcendental character of the recipient and the possibility to transcend the closure of language implies the linguistic communication of persons existing as individuals. As individuals, we are ontically isolated entities, but as beings endowed with speech we are also members of the community of speaking beings. "The Self is inexpressible, since the most emphatically speaking being is responsive and responsible. The Other as a purely communicating party is not a subject who is known, qualified, and rendered perceptible from the perspective of a general concept and subjected to it. He has a face and refers only to itself." (Heidegger, 1985, p. 34)

For Lévinas, the gaze reveals and interprets. I open myself up in front of the other without risking the emptying out of my Self during the discussion; on the contrary, I acquire the meaning of my identity's hidden potential amidst alterity. The other originally contains me as well.[9] In Lévinas' philosophy of identity, the symmetrical content relationship of the communicating parties implies the spheres of love, morality, and the relationship that can be established with God.

The encounter with the Other brings the problem of ethics to he foreground – encountering otherness, I immediately become responsible for it.[10] Of course, the relevance of responsibility transcends here its legal and moral range of meaning. The meeting of each other's gaze manifests the love that touches upon the essence of our being, the destiny that is revealed within the naked gaze, and the inherent human value of the Other. My approach to the Other expresses itself more adequately as attention toward the personal life course conceived of as destiny than in acting in accordance with formal ethical principles. Impersonal and universalizing moral principles are foreign to the dualistic phenomenology of "me-you", as the moral standard is already contained in the unnamable character of our individuality. Lévinas does not discuss the formal moral requirements, since he deduces ethics directly from the individual. Relational selfhood already contains morality.

In the phenomenology of Lévinas, the place of ethical and legal discussions is occupied by the Gaze endowed with a metaphysical function. My gaze directed at the Other ultimately represents the path leading to my own selfhood. In his interview entitled *Philosophy, Justice, and Love* (Levinas, 2000, p. 109-128), Lévinas invokes certain aspects of the original metaphysics of the Gaze. It is the Gaze that reveals the essence of

[8] This recalls Heidegger's famous dictum, according to which we are not speaking a language, but are speaking from within language, and are capable of doing so because we have always already heard the speech of language. See Heidegger, 1985, p. 243.

[9] C. G. Jung makes a similar point in his psychoanalytic analysis of love: given the tight and symmetrical relationship of the parties involved in the relationship, one could say that they contain each other. The Jungian thesis according to which we can speak of their mutual containment only if their sympathy is mutual is also worth to be emphasized. The cosmological idea of Plato's *Timaeus*, according to which the individual unfulfillment that begins with the division created by sexuality, could be cited as well in this respect.

[10] The Lévinasian over-emphasis upon responsibility is an interesting anachronism within the irresponsible society of individualism. The personalism of responsibility is evidently a parallel train of thought to the postmodern ethics of the kind represented by Alasdair MacIntyre.

the Other, who thereby manifests himself as an identity speaking an original language. However, the letting-be while observing alterity should not be regarded as a moral normativity, because, similarly to the anthropological view of Gadamerian hermeneutics, man is an originally open being, who makes use of his openness in the acceptance of alterity, thus actualizing his own openness. Consequently, the ontological aspect of openness is stronger than its ethical dimension.

As I have already emphasized, the Gaze is both the symbol and the criterion of the accepting and understanding relationship of "letting-be". My respectful attitude is associated with the depletion of my selfhood's ontological potential in the Gaze. Since the Gaze represents openness, it cannot be related to other kinds of looking at alterity.[11] Viewing as inspecting or staring is not the Gaze, and is also far removed from the heightening of my self-consciousness through encountering otherness.

Since the Gaze is the result of a certain kind of human behavior, it would be unreasonable to extrapolate it to everybody. The murderer and the executioner, or even the victim lost in a narcissistic closure does not have a true Gaze. The reason for this fact can be found in Lévinas' answer to the question: "What is the meaning of the Gaze?": a pictorially represented form based on an asymmetrical relationship with the other. Our attitude towards the Gaze is an attitude towards our own weakness, as I directly glance at my own alterity within the Gaze of the Other. The affirmation of my Ego does not yet entail the experience of alterity, as Martin Buber stated, but at best the absolute validity of the injunction against killing. Based on the principle of the "asymmetry of intersubjectivity", the other's state is dependent upon my responsibility. In other words, my own moral values are laid down in my legally secured attitude towards my peers. The Gaze is always something more than a reviewing inspection, carrying the weight of my responsibility for other's being.

The epiphany of the Gaze confronts me with the culture of responsibility for others within the face-to-face encounter of acting agents. It brings me into contact with the carrier of the conceived Gaze, tearing me out of my narcissistic isolation and leading to the establishment of the *community* formed through discussion and the interaction of different transactions. In this sense, the assumed publicity of the Gaze carries a serious praxeological significance as well.

The Other is another human being. Lévinas underpins the transcendental character of alterity with a theological reasoning: God as the identity of the Father and the Logos existed as a pure Gaze before Cain. When questioned about the whereabouts of his brother, Cain tries to avoid responsibility. He does not perceive the personal involvement of the Gaze presented as a hierophany and, reacting with a childish spontaneity to God's question, denies that he should be "his brother's keeper", avoiding the responsibility of ethics and invoking the (incorrectly) supposed independence of his being. In Lévinas' interpretation, Cain affirms pure ontology: *I am me, and he is he*[12]; in fact, I have nothing to do with him. However, Cain is very much mistaken in his presupposition of this ontological difference, since I always meet the Other within the horizon of finiteness.

[11] I have already referred to the difference between Sartre's and Lévinas' conceptions of identity. For Sartre, the Other's Gaze alienates me from myself and manifests itself as a potential danger that can at any time deprive me of my intimacy (see the motif of the "voyeur"), while Lévinasiam *Gaze* returns me to my original state that is endangered by social alienation and formalism.

[12] The logic of intersubjectivity eliminates precisely this hermetic separateness of subjectivity.

4. Other's death and the intersubjective sphere of my own selfhood

According to the aim of this discussion and to the ideas outlined above, the basic idea of Lévinas' phenomenology of identity could be expressed by saying that the Other represents the path through which I can access the intersubjective sphere of my own selfhood and understand myself as a subject of the culture of responsibility. The Other manifests himself before me as a Gaze using an individual language that I can affirm (through the asymmetrical relationship unfolding itself during the projection of my identity into otherness) or deny it (relating indifferently to the Other's death and thus becoming complicit in his demise).

The encounter of other people's mortality awakens me to the realization of my selfhood's most private potentialities for existence. As a result of experiencing death, I realize that the Other's destiny is related to the issue of my own ethics and of life's meaning, since my indifference towards others' destiny can incriminate me before my own conscience because of my responsibility for his death. Thus, I have "the obligation not to leave the other alone in the face of death" (Levinas, 2000, p. 152). The questioning Gaze that appeals to my being makes me realize that I have to treat the Other as the *asymmetrical otherness* of my selfhood within my assumed responsibility.

Nevertheless, the issue of finiteness carries an autonomous metaphysical significance, the in-depth exploration of which lies outside the scope of the present paper.

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