

HUSSERL AND LEVINAS: FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY TO THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE OTHER

*João Carvalho*¹
(Universidade de Lisboa)

*Doubtless it is Husserl who is at the origin of my writings.*²

1. Introduction: the transcendental significance of intersubjectivity in Husserl's phenomenology

Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of intersubjectivity is largely an analysis on how one can have consciousness of another experiencing subject within the theoretical and methodological framework of the pure transcendental reduced ego.

The topic of other-awareness, as well as its transcendental significance to phenomenology, is discussed in detail in the 5th of the *Cartesian Meditations*.³ There, Husserl addresses the topic on the basis of a new level of constitution of objectivity as he maintains that a fully objective apprehension of the object of experience depends on its intersubjective constitution.

¹ joao.adri.carvalho@gmail.com

² Emmanuel Levinas, "Nonintentional Consciousness" in *Id., Entre Nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. M. Smith and B. Harshav, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 123.

³ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. D. Cairns, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960.

That is to say, the spatio-temporal object of my perception may be given with the sense of being linked to both myself and others in virtue of the properties of its intentional experience. In Husserl's terms, the phenomenological analysis reveals a deeper level of constitution, insofar as the object is constituted as the "intersubjectively identical physical thing"⁴, in the sense it is available to intentional acts by different subjects of experience.

The experience I have of objects with an intersubjective identical sense presupposes my consciousness of other experiencing subjects. For only by understanding such specific mode of givenness can one account for the transcendental structures of the fully objective, intersubjective world, which is not entirely reducible to the intentional acts in which it is given, precisely due to the fact that it is also the reference point of possible acts of consciousness by other subjects of experience. Thus, the significance and reach of the problem of intersubjectivity from a transcendental point of view is not only to make sense of the world's transcendence as a whole but also – and this task must be the point of departure – to explain the specific mode of givenness of a particular sort of entity: the other. It is thus, as Michael Theunissen puts it, the transcendental meaning of the alien subject that is primarily in question in the husserlian theory of intersubjectivity⁵ – or, in Husserl's own terms, "the transcendental constitution of other subjects and accordingly the transcendental sense 'other subjects' [...]"⁶.

Hence, the transcendental analysis of my experience of the other, of the alter ego, is entailed as a necessary condition for the development of an intersubjective account of objective constitution.

Any transcendental analysis of my consciousness of the other must entail universal validity since, following the phenomenological method, it should be based on a descriptive elucidation and an eidetic intuition of the universal structures of any possible experience of the other.⁷

That is to say, transcendental phenomenology as a systematic elucidation of the object's constitution through disclosure of "those modes of intentional flux that pertain to it"⁸ is not concerned with the empirical and factual conditions of my awareness of the other, nor with examining

⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, trans. F. Kersten, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982, §151, p. 363.

⁵ Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*, trans. C. Macann, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986, p. 55-56.

⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §44, p. 92.

⁷ Cf. Shaun Gallagher, "Fenomenologia da Intersubjectividade: perspectivas transcendentais e empíricas", *Revista Filosófica de Coimbra* 42 (2012), p. 558.

⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §21, p. 51.

my experience of the other as a real, psychological event.⁹ The transcendental constitution of an object endowed with the sense ‘other’ is primarily a phenomenological analysis of its essential structures or, in Husserl’s terms, of its “set of *structural types*, which is ‘invariable’, inviolably the same”.¹⁰ Hence, Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of intersubjectivity aims to provide a description of the essential noematic structures of the “other” as well as of the nature of the noetic acts involving its “sense giving” (*Sinngebung*). In Husserl’s terms, a transcendental analysis of the experience of the other should determine “in what intentionalities, syntheses, motivations, the sense ‘other ego’ becomes fashioned in me”.¹¹

The other, Husserl maintained, is in the phenomenological sense a very particular object since it cannot be reduced to its physical presence. The structures of consciousness that entitle us to represent the other as an other subject cannot be reduced to the pure formal structures of all objects of experience, due to the very fact that my understanding of the other cannot be submitted to the strictures of direct verification, nor can I have an original experience of the other’s inner conscious life.¹²

In fact, the other as an other ego cannot be perceived or given directly, neither can be presented as something originarily, “in the flesh”, in *propria persona*. The other is, to put it simply, inaccessible in direct experience. Hence, the other is this particular kind of subject matter of the phenomenological research that cannot be made directly present in experience – and thus can never be present in my original immanent sphere of consciousness – due to its own being, its own essence.

⁹ In *The Paris Lectures*, Husserl gives a brief but accurate description of the nature of phenomenology as transcendental idealism:

“Our idealism is nothing other than a consistently carried through self-disclosure, that is, in the form of a systematic egological science, of any meaning of being which makes sense to me, the ego. [...] It is an idealism, rather, which follows from a genuinely worked-out analysis of meanings as these appear (to the ego in experience) in the transcendence of nature, of culture and of the world in general, which is, in turn, the systematic disclosure of the constituting intentionality it the project of phenomenology as transcendental idealism”. Edmund Husserl, *The Paris Lectures*, trans. P. Koestenbaum, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964, pp. 33-34.

From here, the author can arrive at a definitive conclusion of phenomenology as a “consequentially executed self-explication in the form of a systematic egological science, an explication of my ego as subject of every possible cognition, and indeed with respect to every sense of what exists, wherewith the latter might be able to *have* a sense for me, the ego”. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §41, p. 86.

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §21, p. 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, §42, p. 90.

¹² Cf. *Ibid.*, §42.

The other's experiences necessarily escape my experience as I cannot verify the nature of those experiences through direct perception.

The other is, in this sense, the paradigmatic concept of "transcendence", insofar as it refers to that which transcends the field of consciousness immanent to the subject. In *Ideas I* Husserl declared that phenomenology consists in a descriptive eidetic theory of pure experience insofar as it is concerned to be a doctrine of "transcendentally pure mental processes as viewed in the phenomenological attitude".¹³ However, the following problem arises when one considers this definition of phenomenology within the framework of intersubjectivity: on the one hand, if *pure experience* entails, in the husserlian sense, a specific way of being present to one's consciousness, the first difficulty of a phenomenological analysis of intersubjectivity will be to explain how the other, precisely that which transcends the self, can be constituted *in me*, within the field of my transcendental ego, if it cannot, by essence, receive its (noematic) structural sense from any intentional act of my conscious life. On the other hand, the internal structures of the other, as of any object of my experience, must respect the methodological demand that Husserl had put forward in the 5th Cartesian Meditation, according to which "every sense that any existent whatever has or can have for me - in respect of its 'what' and its 'it exists and actually is' - is a sense *in* and arising from my intentional life, becoming clarified and uncovered for me in consequence of my life's constitutive synthesis, in systems of harmonious verification".¹⁴

Hence, the difficulty lies in understanding which intentional structures of consciousness are involved when I experience the other and how the other, as the paradigmatic concept of transcendence, can be constituted within the theoretical framework of my pure transcendental ego, precisely if the transcendental-phenomenological reductions of the world to complex structures of sense, and these to the subjective sphere of the ego, had suspended specific metaphysical theses about the existence of transcendence and about the nature of such an object of experience.

¹³ Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, §75, p. 167.

¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §43, p. 91.

2. Husserl's solution to the problem of constituting the *alter ego*

Among the fundamental beliefs of the 5th Cartesian Meditations is the belief that to experience the other consists in grasping a unity of another's harmonious behaviour through the perception of its own kinaesthetic sensations, that I understand as signs of a "governing" (*Walten*) "living body" (*Leib*), and by means of which I recognize the other as another subject of experience in the midst of a "surrounding world" (*Umwelt*).¹⁵ In fact, Husserl claims that I experience others not only as world objects but also "as governing psychically in their respective natural organisms".¹⁶

Therefore, for Husserl, to see the other as a subject of experience is to perceive a global behaviour which expresses an ongoing practical relationship with *this* "surrounding world". For my perception of the other is not just an act of apprehending its relationship with its world; it is mainly an act of integrating the world that the other experiences within my own "surrounding world", thus constituting an intersubjective shared world, with common structures valid both to me and to others.¹⁷

It is thus the *presentation* of the body of the other that motivates the "appresentation" (*Appräsentation*) of his psychic life. Hence, the own body is, for Husserl, the basis for understanding the bodily behaviour of the other. In this sense, my non-original apperception of the other through my perception of its "living body" (*Leib*) is experienced on the basis of an analogy with my own experience and with my inner conscious life:

In this pre-eminent intentionality there becomes constituted for me the new existence-sense that goes beyond my monadic very-ownness; there becomes constituted an ego, not as "I myself", but as mirrored in my own Ego, in my monad. The second ego, however, is not simply there and strictly presented; rather is he constituted as "alter ego" - the ego indicated as one moment by this expression being I myself in my ownness. *The "Other", according to his own constituted sense, points to me myself; the other is a "mirroring" of my own self [...]*.¹⁸

According to Husserl, my understanding of this *alter ego* occurs in three stages, each adding a new layer of sense to the previous one. In the first

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §52, p. 114.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, §43, p. 91.

¹⁷ Cf. Pedro Alves, "Lévinas crítico de Husserl e de Sartre sobre a teoria da intersubjectividade e da alteridade", in Cristina Beckert (coord.), *Lévinas entre nós*, Lisboa: Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa, 2006, p. 144.

¹⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §44, p. 94. The italics are mine.

stage, I apprehend the other in its physicality, purely as an object of my perception. Secondly, I recognize a visual similarity between my body and the bodily appearance of the other. Through a similarity with my own body, I understand that the other, like myself, has an external appearance which does not present all of the other's nature. Then, I transfer to the other a meaning or sense that I already possess and recognize as mine, through a process of "analogizing" or "assimilating apperception". My organic body thus functions as a mediator of the alien experience, since, at all times, serves as the "primal establishment" or "originary foundation" (*Urstiftung*). Since it is always prominent in the field of actual and possible perceptions and since it is "equipped" with the specific sense of "primordial originariness"¹⁹ it is the psychophysical ego that brings the other as having an ongoing sense, identical to the sense I attribute myself.

Thus, one can say that according to Husserl, my apprehension (*Auffassung*) of the *alter ego* follows a spatial frame in which the alien body appears to my perception. But while the preceding analysis took place mainly within the circle of my perception – for the interpretation of behaviour is actually a perceptual experience – Husserl identifies a new stage of constitution of the other, that, as Paul Ricœur states, intends to add to the alien experience a new layer of sense through free creations of the imagination.²⁰ For Husserl, I grasp this new sense of the other in the mode of "if I were there" (illic). I am "here" (hic) but through free variations of my imagination I realize I could be "there" (illic), where the other is, and see the same things under another perspective – thus, the other is the *alter ego* in the mode of "there".

Hence, in Husserl's analysis the different levels of constitution mark a new step in the direction of the suppression of alterity, of otherness, since the other, the *alter ego*, regardless of its distinctiveness, is apprehended in what Husserl calls a "unity of similarity"²¹, an associative relation (*Paarung*) in which my body and the body of the other are given "in the unity of a consciousness"²², and through which a sense-giving transfer occurs into another life in *my* imagination.

Although the different moments and stages of the constitution of the *alter ego* do not present to my own sphere the subjective life of the other

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, §51, p. 113.

²⁰ Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, trans. E. Ballard and L. Embree, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967, pp. 128-129.

²¹ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §51, p. 112.

²² *Ibid.*

‘in the original’, they do, at the heart of the analogical transfer, try to render the other intelligible through the movement of encroachment by which the sense “ego” is transferred from the original - myself as a psychophysical unity - to the analogue.²³ In fact, the passive association of pairing, which takes place on the basis of similarity, is the condition of possibility that allows me to understand in the other a sense that is not accessible to me in the original, but which I transfer to it. It is thus in this sense that Husserl’s finds in pairing “a mutual awakening and an overlaying of each with the objective sense of the other”.²⁴

Husserl’s use of the concept of “empathy” (*Einfühlung*) to name the specific experience of the *transcendental alter ego*²⁵ entails precisely this sense, for it names a quasi-perceptual awareness of the other just like the awareness I have of myself as a subject of experience.²⁶

In Husserl’s analysis, thus, intersubjective consciousness is a process of transfer based on likeness between an open plurality of subjects. The consciousness of an other is not an awareness of an other that manifests itself in its own sense, but consciousness of an *alter ego* that receives its structural, constitutive sense from the sphere of my ownness. That is to say, to have consciousness of an other, in Husserl’s sense, does not mean to have consciousness of an absolutely other, as a limit (which would necessarily escape absolutely from my sphere of ownness); it means, instead, to have consciousness of an *alter ego*, who is an *ego* in the same sense as I am an *ego*. This specific mediation that characterizes Husserl’s analysis of the experience of the other thus account for its progressive suppression of alterity.

²³ *Ibid.*, §50, p. 110. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, p. 129.

²⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §51, p. 113.

The husserlian theme of the “mutual awakening” will be recovered by Emmanuel Levinas, in the broader context of the development of his philosophy of alterity, to indicate the rupture of the Same, an awakening coming from the other that ceaselessly puts the priority of the Same into question:

“Husserl’s theory of Intersubjective Reduction describes the astonishing or traumatizing (*trauma*, not *thauma*) possibility of a sobering up in which the *I*, facing the Other, is freed from itself and awakens from dogmatic slumber. [...] The Reduction, repeating as it were the disturbance of the Same by the Other who is not absorbed into the Same [...] describes the awakening [...]”. Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and Awakening” in *Id.*, *Entre Nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 87.

²⁵ Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §61, p. 146.

²⁶ For a brief account of the problem of ‘empathy’ and ‘emphatic experience’ on Husserl’s phenomenology cf. Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*, pp. 69-72.

3. Levinas' critique of Husserl's account of alterity

In sharp contrast with Husserl's approach to the problem of alterity, Levinas understood that the experience of the other does not entail an analogical transfer of sense, by which the life of the other is comprehended through my inner conscious life – and in which the otherness is dependent on the sameness. According to Levinas, the experience of the other fundamentally consists in the expression of an absolute limit, an irruption of pure exteriority irreducible to immanence, that manifests the sense of the asymmetrical encounter with the other in the face-to-face relation. Hence, it is, for Levinas, the asymmetrical sense of the way in which the other *expresses itself* (*kath'auto*) that the phenomenological description of intersubjectivity should firstly explain in its constitutiveness: a level of experience that Husserl failed to describe.

One of the main purposes of Levinas' works is to understand the expressiveness of this alterity prior to the husserlian analysis and processes in which this expressiveness becomes attenuated, and at the limit, elided. The concept "Face" (*visage*) is used to describe "the way in which the other presents himself"²⁷ in its otherness as absolute resistance to my sphere of immanence.

Differently from a constitutive theory of alterity, differently from a transcendental analysis of intersubjectivity, one can find the main focus of Levinas' works to be the sense of this radical alterity, the thematic fixation on the sense structures of its expressiveness, beyond the limits in which Husserl had confined it to "the presence of being" and the "identity of the Same".²⁸

Besides, we should note that Levinas' idea of a transcendence beyond the totality of being and identity of the Same – his insistence that ethics precedes ontology – calls into question not only Husserl's transcendental analysis of the other but also the priority of being and the traditional platonic understanding of the way kinds relate to other kinds, as described in the central section of *The Sophist*.²⁹ In fact, Levinas thinking of alterity is

²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An essay in exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 2007, p. 50.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas presents an accurate description of this concept: "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face". *Ibid.*

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and Awakening" in *Id.*, *Entre Nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 88.

²⁹ Cf. Pedro Alves, "Lévinas crítico de Husserl e de Sartre sobre a teoria da intersubjectividade e da alteridade", p. 146-147.

deeper than the mere difference between beings that participate in the kind of Being. Levinas insists in a form of radical alterity that does not depend on any quality that would distinguish beings neither does he conceive the alterity of the other, which expresses itself in the face-to-face encounter, as an ontological movement. He speaks of a state that is “otherwise than being” (*autrement qu’être*) for the alterity of the other is deeper than any sort of ontological mediation, in the sense that the other reveals himself as an absolutely other (*absolument autre*), irreducible not only to my inner conscious life but also to the immanent field of being and, in consequence, to Husserl’s concept of “surrounding world” (*Umwelt*).

In light of this, I can hold that Levinas is not mainly concerned with the philosophical category of “alterity” nor with the transcendental, impersonal meaning of “otherness”, but, instead, with the sense of this irreducible concrete relation of the face-to-face experience, that is to say, with alterity as the primordial mode of experience (which shows itself in what Levinas calls the “traumatism of awakefulness”³⁰). It is at this level that I recognize Levinas’ revision of Husserl’s topic of intersubjectivity, revision which I would now like to address in the remainder of this paper.

We should firstly note that Levinas holds that in Husserl’s phenomenology metaphysical exteriority is reduced to the fundamental immanence of the Self. There is a specific sense in which Husserl’s concept of intentionality entails, according to Levinas, a reduction of exteriority to the immanence of consciousness, since the thinking and the thinkable, the correlation between thought and world is given in the unity of my consciousness. It is precisely this sense of the intentional experience, in which the Same rediscovers itself in the Other, that Levinas puts in question, recovering the fundamental idea of his own reading of the 5th Cartesian Meditation: an essential inadequacy between the original perception of myself and the analogical - thus “non-original” - apprehension of the other is always operating at the heart of the intersubjective experience, or, in Levinas’ words:

[...] intentionality, where thought remains an *adequation* with the object, does not define consciousness at its fundamental level. All knowing qua intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinite, which is pre-eminently *non-adequation*.³¹

³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and Awakening” in *Id., Entre Nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 86.

³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An essay in exteriority*, p. 27.

In light of this, the intersubjective experience is no longer understood on the basis of an imaginative, fictional symmetrical relation between two egos, but it is instead apprehended on the basis of a radical difference between myself and what appears and expresses itself as an absolutely other. Hence, the sense of *experience* can no longer be stated in terms of perceptual evidence, as in Husserl's analysis. Levinas thus revises the sense of the term redefining it as "a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows thought [...]".³²

In this regard, the description of the other as an "absolutely other" will henceforth thwart any reduction of heterogeneity to objectivity, which for Levinas was still the husserlian mode of approaching the other. Moreover, my experience of alterity can no longer be described in terms of a type of constituting activity of the ego. The task is now to investigate the structural sense "other person", not on the basis of the sphere of ownness, but having as point of departure a primordial sense that emerges with the irruption of the other, as a relation to a pure exteriority prior to the identity of the Same. This sense exceeds the idea of the other in me for it is a sense received from an *encounter* with an absolute limit, from an experience prior and more decisive than any form of impersonal transcendental experience of intersubjectivity.

It is precisely the primacy of the face-to-face relation, Levinas argues, that constitutes the non-gnoseological event necessary to reflection and constitution themselves, and which makes the "primordial sphere" lose its priority.³³ This event - the ethical exigence of the face - describes the disturbance of the Same and entails a psychic life governed by an ethics prior to any form of subjective constitution.

Given my interpretation, I would argue that for Levinas the essence of subjectivity is alterity, in the sense that alterity is its condition of possibility. For Levinas, the other precedes me and the grasping of the other is that which allows me to grasp myself as a subject. This is the core element lacking in Husserl's approach to constituting the other: a specific and irreducible meaning of "transcendence-in-immanence" characterizes, at its core, the *essential* structure of subjectivity. Hence, for Levinas, the relation to the nonlimited by the Same, the absolutely other, is now an expression of another person that does not receive his sense from me, but who entails, in himself, an ethical resistance to every act of "sense giving" transfer that Husserl describes.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and Awakening" in *Id.*, *Entre Nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*, pp. 86-87.

The present inquiry does not constitute a defence of such a thesis, neither does it explore the importance of this claim in Levinas' *oeuvre*. But in developing this reading I have shown how Levinas' thinking of the other remains in debt to the fundamental topic of Husserl's 5th Cartesian Mediation: the problem of (in)adequacy between sphere of ownness and alterity, immanence and transcendence.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents two different, although related, approaches to the problem of the experience of the other person: E. Husserl's phenomenology of intersubjectivity and E. Levinas' ethics. I begin by (1) addressing the transcendental significance of the experience of intersubjectivity in the broader context of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. I then turn to (2) Husserl's solution to the paradox of constituting the alter ego, identifying and elucidating the key-concepts of his inquiry. I hold that throughout his analysis there is a dominant underlying meaning in which the alterity of the other person is progressively suppressed and, ultimately, elided. Finally, I discuss (3) the consequences of Husserl's analysis of the other in light of Levinas' ethics. I hold that Husserl's claim that there is a fundamental difference between the experience of myself and my analogical experience of the other is the basis upon which Levinas' develops a new concept of experience, not as *perception* but as *encounter*. Upon close reading, I claim that Levinas' revision of the topic of alterity is, ultimately, a consequence of Husserl's transcendental analysis of intersubjectivity.

Keywords: Phenomenology – Intersubjectivity – Alterity – Edmund Husserl – Emmanuel Levinas

RESUMO

Este ensaio apresenta duas abordagens distintas, embora estreitamente relacionadas, ao problema filosófico da experiência do outro: a fenomenologia da intersubjetividade de E. Husserl e a ética de E. Levinas. Começo por (1) aproximar o significado transcendental da experiência da intersubjetividade na matriz teórica da fenomenologia husserliana. De seguida, procuro (2) apresentar a solução que Husserl oferece ao paradoxo constitutivo do alter ego, identificando e elucidando os conceitos-chave da sua abordagem. Defendo que esta análise sustém uma estrutura de sentido dominante, segundo a qual a alteridade do outro é progressivamente suprimida e, no limite, elidida. Por fim, (3) abordo as consequências da análise husserliana da constituição do outro à luz da ética de Levinas. Procuro defender que a concessão de Husserl de que existe uma diferença fundamental entre a experiência de si e a experiência analógica do outro constitui a base a partir da qual Levinas desenvolve uma outra concepção de experiência, não enquanto *percepção*, mas fundamentalmente como *encontro*. A leitura que desenvolvo procura, por fim, sugerir que a revisão levinasiana do tópico da alteridade se deixa inscrever, fundamentalmente, como uma consequência da análise transcendental que Husserl desenvolve em redor do conceito de intersubjetividade.

Palavras-chave: Fenomenologia – Intersubjetividade – Alteridade – Edmund Husserl – Emmanuel Levinas