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First Impressions Reconsidered: Some Notes on the Lévinasian Critique of Husserl

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates an intriguing ambivalence in Lévinas's reading(s) of Husserl's phenomenology of internal-time consciousness. The article focuses on the specific treatment of the Husserlian 'proto-impression', suggesting that one (under-appreciated) aspect of Lévinas's approach may serve to undermine, or even 'un-say', its better known counterpart.

Introduction

Given that Lévinas would eventually declare the deformalization of temporal representation to be 'the essential theme' of his research,¹ it is hardly surprising that the Husserlian analysis of time-consciousness should have received consistent critical scrutiny throughout Lévinas's oeuvre. To be sure, there is a more prominent focus upon (and explicit opposition to) Heideggerian finitude; but such focus itself seems to presuppose a regular critique of Husserl, particularly his stress on presence and re-presentation, in order to indicate a more general faultline in so much of the established phenomenological approach to temporality and temporalization.

In the notes that follow, I shall outline something of the nature of Lévinas's critique — in part, by showing something of the phenomenological alternative that he tries to offer. However, by focussing upon Lévinas's own, differing treatment(s) of the Husserlian analysis of 'proto-impression', I shall also investigate the possibility of a radically different assessment of Husserlian temporal analysis — an assessment which may well beg fundamental questions about the aforementioned Lévinasian alternative. My main concern, I should stress, is more with Lévinas's critical understanding than with the fine detail of the 'object' of that understanding: what follows, therefore, is intended as an engagement with Lévinas's engagement with Husserl, rather than an engagement with Husserl *per se*.

I

Lévinas on Husserl on Temporality

Understandably, Lévinas's principal contentions regarding temporality and temporalization have been mainly understood in terms of his trenchant opposition to Heidegger: as the title of Lévinas's first *magnum opus* already indicates, finitude should never be taken as the ultimate horizon which Heidegger himself took it to be; and, as has become so well known, Lévinas will contend that the 'immediate' overflow of the Other's face suggests a kind of structural measurelessness that is, at the very least, comparable with the Cartesian idea of infinity (whereby any idea that the knowing mind might form is always exceeded by the *ideatum* of such an idea). Furthermore, beyond the specific question of

infinity, Lévinas would devote so much of his later work, in particular, to a certain deconstruction of the Heideggerian ek-stases, depicting them as a (literally) self-centred ‘making present’ or homogenisation of temporal excess: for Lévinas, Heidegger consistently fails to respect the sheer alterity of time (principally by failing to address the question of *generation*, or generations, which it entails). Overall, for Lévinas, the Heideggerian treatment of temporality is left stunted by its fixation upon *Dasein*’s finitude.²

But what, specifically, of Husserl? Lévinas’s general comments (on the tendency, within phenomenology, towards a ‘will to presence’) may be directed mainly towards Heidegger; nonetheless, it seems that the critique of Heidegger presupposes, as a kind of armature, the critique of Husserl. More specifically, it seems that the ‘ontological imperialism’ which Lévinas condemns in Heidegger can already be found, allegedly, in Husserlian phenomenology. Thus, for Lévinas, Heidegger’s (anti-ethical) concern with Being seems, at least in part, to be the full manifestation of certain Husserlian propensities: authentic, care-full *Dasein*, concerned with the Self-Constancy of anticipatory resoluteness, is (so it seems) merely the dramatic, existential, intensification (and certainly not the contrary) of the monadic ego-pole that Husserl understands as intentional consciousness. Which is why Lévinas regularly conjoins the concern with Being and the concern with cognition: whether ontological or epistemological, so much of the previous phenomenological tradition has failed to do justice to alterity.

Husserlian intentionality, we are told, is almost archetypal in its privileging of the knowing gaze. Thus:

[Husserlian] Intelligibility, characterized by clarity (*claret*), is a total adequation of the thinker with what is thought, in the precise sense of a mastery exercised by the thinker upon what is thought in which the object’s resistance as an exterior being vanishes. This mastery is total and [...] is accomplished as a giving of meaning (*sens*): the object of representation is reducible to noemata. The intelligible is precisely what is entirely reducible to noemata [...]. Clarity is the disappearance of what could shock (*heurter*).³

Noesis always seeks to *overcome* alterity (including sensation); ‘consciousness of...’ always seeks to become the foundation of what shows itself; and so phenomenological ‘horizon’ comes to play ‘a role equivalent to the *concept* in classical idealism’.⁴ With Husserl, it seems that reflection and thematization always want to win out.

Above all, though, it is the Husserlian concern with representation (or, more specifically: re-present-ation) that betrays a kind of inner truth of phenomenology — and which returns us to the specific issue(s) of temporality (and temporalization). For just as Heideggerian ek-stases are found wanting, so their Husserlian ‘foundation’ is exposed, supposedly, as a volitional drive always to render temporal disparity present within a simultaneousness, or conjunction brought about by ‘*my grasp*’. By discovering (or re-discovering) presence as the work of consciousness, Lévinas suggests, the Husserlian ego reduces — fatefully — the time of consciousness to the consciousness of time.⁵ The ‘primordial intrigue of time’⁶ is dismissed, or at least subordinated, by the imposition of a representational frame: past and future become merely ‘retained or anticipated presents’;⁷ intentional consciousness maintains control — in terms of the present; Husserlian representation asserts its own status by positing ‘a pure present without even tangential ties with time’.⁸

For Lévinas, then, Husserlian representation seeks never to be preceded. It anticipates all surprises. It is ‘not *marked* by the past but *utilizes* it as a represented and objective element’.⁹ It denies its own enduring, its temporal succession, by converting exteriority into its noemata, thereby reducing alterity to the work of meaning-bestowing thought. (‘Such is the work’, Lévinas declares, ‘of the Husserlian *epochē*’.¹⁰) All told, the Husserlian analysis assumes that time has ‘exhausted itself (*s’épuisait*) in its way of making itself known or of conforming to the demands (*exigences*) of its manifestation’.¹¹ Hence:

The constitution of time in Husserl is also a constitution of time in terms of an already effective consciousness of presence in its disappearance and in its ‘retention’, its immanence, and its anticipation — disappearance and immanence that already imply what is to be established, without any indication being given about the privileged empirical situation to which those modes of disappearance in the past and imminence in the future would be attached.¹²

The Husserlian thinking of time is, it seems, essentially as one with its Heideggerian successor. In both, the alterity of time is forced into a Procrustean containment; future and past are never acknowledged ‘on their own terms’. Against both, Lévinas wants to highlight an alterity irreducible to any noetico-noematic correlation — ‘a lapse of time that does not return, a diachrony refractory to all synchronization’.¹³ By thinking other-wise, Lévinas claims, he might undo re-presentation and unveil a temporalization which is not *mine* and which exceeds my ‘now’: a future which can never be anticipated, and a past which was never present.

II

Lévinas on Husserl on Proto-Impression

We find some of Lévinas’s most concentrated attention to Husserlian temporality — attention which seems, initially, to unveil the founding structure of the Heideggerian ek-stases — in the analysis he provides, in *Otherwise than Being*, of the ‘absolute’ primal streaming, the realm of the proto-impression (or primal impression), which Husserl takes to be the basis of conscious life itself.¹⁴ Needless to say, this apparent self-temporalizing of the acts of consciousness is regarded with deep suspicion: although such a primal realm might seem beyond objectification, beyond intentionality, and beyond (or beneath) self-coincidence, its ‘true status’, Lévinas maintains, is more to do with guaranteeing the prestige of autarchic consciousness.

For Lévinas, it is not just that ‘the primal impression is [...] not *impressed* without consciousness’¹⁵ — a point which might suggest a distinction between the intrinsic nature of primal impression and the ‘secondary’ role of consciousness. It is also, and more significantly, that the intrinsic nature of primal impression is itself confirmation of the ‘hegemony of presence’ — as Lévinas would have it here, it is the absolute source and beginning of all temporal modification, the spontaneous centre which is *indifferent* to protention and retention.

As such, primal ‘streaming’ becomes, fatefully, ‘the prototype of theoretical objectification’;¹⁶ it is as if the primacy of presence is *already confirmed* by this notion of origin and creation. (Proto-impression precedes all else — even its own possibility. Its presence is *pure*.) The primal impression

might seem, ‘initially’, to be beyond intentionality — but it is always ‘fitted back in the normal order’¹⁷ and is never on ‘the hither side of the same or of the origin’.¹⁸ Accordingly, ‘the non-intentionality of the primal retention is not a loss of consciousness’¹⁹ — for ‘nothing can be produced in a clandestine way (*à l’être clandestinement*)’, ‘(n)othing enters incognito into the Same’,²⁰ ‘nothing can break the thread of consciousness’.²¹ The (negative) significance of Husserl’s analysis of internal time consciousness could hardly be greater, therefore: for Lévinas, the Husserlian interpretation of proto-impression is (nothing less than) ‘the most remarkable point’ of a philosophy ‘in which intentionality “constitutes” the universe’.²²

But just how valid is Lévinas’s contention, in *Otherwise than Being*, about this ‘remarkable point’ in Husserlian thought? Is it the case that originary impression confirms and sanctifies the domain of ‘the Same’ — and hence that it excludes the dia-chronic? Is the Husserlian analysis nothing more than the suppression of temporal alterity? Is the primal impression to be understood solely in terms of ‘autonomy’? In attempting to answer these questions, one of the most instructive texts we can consult is another penetrating, although very different, reading of *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* — one which Lévinas himself gives us. For, in his 1965 essay ‘Intentionality and Sensation’,²³ Lévinas reads Husserlian ‘absolute streaming’ in a way that may not quite contradict his more standard approach, but which certainly throws into question some of the central contentions just examined.²⁴

The 1965 work is designed as a general (although intensive) survey of the significance of intentionality’s corporeal ‘basis’ — and, not surprisingly, given this context, the issue of the proto-impression is at the centre of Lévinas’s treatment. However, here, unlike in *Otherwise than Being*, he wants to stress that the *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, overall, is in no sense ‘the deduction or construction of time starting out from an atemporal gaze (*d’un regard intemporal*) embracing the proto-impression and its pale modifications’.²⁵ On the contrary, Husserl finds the proto-impression — pure of all ideality, ‘nonideality *par excellence*’²⁶ — to be more like a kind of immanent disjunction ‘within’ consciousness. (As he also puts this: ‘An accentuated, living, absolutely new instant — the proto-impression — already deviates from that needlepoint (*pointe d’aiguille*) where it matures (*mûrit*) absolutely *present*’.²⁷)

The proto-impression is, fundamentally, *non-coincidence*, ‘presenting’ itself only in terms of its own departure or deviation from the present. Its very ‘structure’ is divergence — so that the proto-impression ‘in itself’ is always already beyond itself, always already the event of ‘dephasing’. The proto-impression is not ‘in sequence’; it is more a transgression of continuity, a fundamental *lapse*. Meanwhile (if this is not too inappropriate a term), the protention and retention which ‘attach’ to any proto-impressional instant are never adequate to, and are overflowed by, sensational flux: adequation, presence and recuperation are ‘defeated’, so to speak.²⁸ There is a kind of constitutive gap, Lévinas finds, between sensation-event and proto-impression: the former both precedes *and* succeeds the latter; this, in turn, seems to found the ‘diachrony stronger (*plus forte*) than structural synchronism’²⁹ that Lévinas finds at the core of Husserlian embodiment.

Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly of all, Lévinas’s reading of genesis and ‘origin’ here seems (again, *contra* the reading in *Otherwise than Being*) to undermine rather than bolster the autonomy of the subject: absolute

primal streaming can certainly be seen as source, beginning, or creation, as *genesis spontanea*; yet, far from this confirming the primacy of presence and theoretical objectification, what arises ‘in’ this origin only serves to confirm *alterity*, the un-present-able. There is, Lévinas insists, ‘unforeseeable novelty’ arising within this origin; any fulfilment is ‘beyond all conjecture, all expectation, all germination, and all continuity, and consequently is wholly passivity (*toute passivité*), receptivity of an “other” penetrating the same.’³⁰ (This, in turn, shows ‘the essence of all thought as the reserve of a fullness that escapes (*d’une plénitude qui échappe*)’.³¹) Alterity ‘is’ at the core of the self’s temporalization: deep within immanence, within apparently ‘indistinct sedimentation and thick alluvium’,³² we find nothing less than *transcendence* (understood here literally, as ‘a passing over, an overstepping’, as a ‘going-beyond-itself-within-itself’, as ‘the zero point of representation [...] [that] is beyond this zero’³³). The answer to Lévinas’s central question in the essay ‘Intentionality and Sensation’ — ‘Is there diachrony within intentionality?’³⁴ — is, therefore, an unambiguous ‘Yes’: as he will conclude, it is this ‘divergence from’ that is nothing less than ‘(t)he mystery of intentionality’.³⁵

III Conclusion

The issues raised by this disparity in Lévinas’s approaches to the Husserlian proto-impression have huge significance. For one thing — and, admittedly, this may seem a banal truism — we are reminded of the immense and fecund richness of Husserl’s analysis. But, beyond this fairly obvious point, we are also confronted with the possibility — unveiled *by Lévinas himself* — that Husserl may well counter the Lévinasian critique of his phenomenology, by ‘thinking other-wise’ in a way that not only differs from but also profoundly challenges Lévinas. As Lévinas shows us, Husserl uncovers a ‘structural’ alterity *within* the self, a ‘knotted intrigue’ that is not the product or outcome or effect of the Other. Husserl, that is to say, raises the possibility that — ‘prior’ to encounter with the Other, as such — we already encounter alterity within ‘our own’ temporalization. Thus, before any delineation of the Lévinasian Other, Husserl may have already uncovered an irreducible otherness that resists synchronization within noetico-noematic correlation — but, in this case, the irreducible *self*-otherness of our ‘absolute subjectivity’. It seems that Husserl (read through Lévinas’s more generous 1965 appraisal) may show us that the consciousness of time neither overwhelms nor suppresses the time of consciousness; rather, he shows that the consciousness of time is ‘always already’ the time of consciousness — and so, is ‘always already’ lapse, dispersion, iteration, alterity.³⁶

NOTES

¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, ‘The Other, Utopia, and Justice’, in *Is it Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. by Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 200–210 (p. 209); ‘L’autre, utopie et justice’, in *Autrement*, (102, Nov. 1988), pp. 50–60 (p. 59). Hereafter OUI, with the translation’s pagination preceding the original’s.

² I have treated some of these issues elsewhere. See Ian Leask, 'Finitude: The Final Frontier? Heidegger and Lévinas on Death', in *At the Heart of Education. School Chaplaincy & Pastoral Care*, ed. by James Norman (Dublin: Veritas, 2004), pp. 239–250, and 'Contra Fundamental Ontology: the Centrality of the Heidegger-Critique in Lévinas's Phenomenology', *Maynooth Philosophical Papers*, 2, (Maynooth, 2004), pp. 51–58.

³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 123–24; *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (Phaenomenologica 8) (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), pp. 96–97. Henceforth, abbreviated as TI, with the English translation's pagination preceding the original's.

⁴ TI, p. 44–5:15.

⁵ See Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Diachrony and Representation', in *Entre Nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshay (London: Athlone, 1998), pp. 159–177 (p. 163); 'Diachronie et Representation', in *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 55, 4, (1985), 85–98 (p. 88).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.164:88-89.

⁷ Emmanuel Lévinas, 'From the One to the Other: Transcendence and Time', in *Entre Nous*, pp. 133–154 (p.138); 'De l'un à l'autre. Transcendance et temps', *Archivo de Filosofia*, 51 1-3 (1983), 21–38 (p. 25). Hereafter abbreviated as FOTO, with the translation's pagination preceding the original's.

⁸ TI, p. 125:98

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ FOTO, p. 138:25

¹² OUJ, p. 209:59

¹³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981), p. 9; *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), p.17. Hereafter abbreviated as OB, with the translation's pagination preceding the original's.

¹⁴ See Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, ed. Martin Heidegger, trans. J.S.Churchill (Indiana UP, 1964), *passim*.

¹⁵ OB, p. 33:41

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ OB, p. 33:42

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ OB, p. 34:43

²⁰ OB, p. 33:42

²¹ OB, p. 34:43

²² OB, p. 33:42

²³ Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Intentionality and Sensation', in E. Lévinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. by R. Cohen & M. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998), pp.135–150; 'Intentionalité et sensation', in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 71–72, fasc. 1-2, (1965), pp. 34–54. Hereafter abbreviated as IS, with the translation's pagination preceding the original's.

²⁴ IS has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. For an exception to the general rule, see Rudolf Bernet, 'Lévinas's Critique of Husserl', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lévinas*, ed. by Simon Critchley & Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 82–99, esp. pp. 91–93.

²⁵ IS, p. 142:44

²⁶ IS, p. 144:46

²⁷ IS, p. 142:43

²⁸ See IS, p. 144:46–47.

²⁹ IS, p. 148:52

³⁰ IS, p. 144:46–47

³¹ IS, p. 145:47

³² IS, p. 149:53

³³ IS, p. 148:51

³⁴ IS, p. 143:45

³⁵ IS, p. 145:47

³⁶ I should like to express my thanks to Dr James Mc Guirk for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

