
Lévinas, Husserl and Damásio – From Otherness as Experience to Experience as Otherness

Lévinas, Husserl e Damásio – Da outridade como experiência à experiência como outridade

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Resumo

A presente leitura é dividida em quatro partes. Começarei distinguindo três sentidos de exterioridade, de forma a esclarecer o conceito de exterioridade de Lévinas como foi exposto no ensaio *Totalidade e Infinito* e com o qual os termos *outridade* e *experiência* estão associados. Optei por colocar desta forma, para não ter que especificar cada um destes termos, pois eles serão clarificados ao longo da segunda e terceira parte. Inicialmente, discutirei *outridade como experiência*, experiência do outro, mas *não-perceptiva*, *experiência pré-intencional*, anterior mesmo à diferença entre consciência e inconsciência. A seguir, invertendo a ordem dos termos, irei tratar *experiência como outridade*, isto é, experiência que, enquanto não cessa de ser experiência mantém uma relação de outridade. Lévinas escreve em *Totalidade e Infinito*: “experiência significa precisamente a relação com o outro absoluto”. Nos contornos desta discussão, irei comentar a resposta levinasiana à quinta *Meditação Cartesiana* de Husserl e, finalmente, aproximarei o pensamento de Lévinas à pesquisa neurológica de António Damásio. Na última sessão explorarei diferentes caminhos a fim de manter o seguinte paradoxo - superfície não tem profundidade: superfície é profundidade.

Palavras-chave: Outridade; experiência; exterioridade/interioridade; sensibilidade

Abstract

The present article is divided into four parts. I will begin by distinguishing three meanings of exteriority, so as to illuminate Lévinas' own concept of exteriority, as expounded in the essay *Totality and Infinity* and with which the terms *otherness* and *experience* are associated. I phrase it in this way so as to avoid specifying each of these terms, which I will attempt to clarify throughout the second and third parts. First, I will discuss *otherness as experience*, experience of the other, but *non-perceptive*, *pre-intentional experience*, prior even to the difference between consciousness and unconsciousness. Then, by inverting the order of the terms, I will address *experience as otherness*, i.e., experience which, while not ceasing to be experience, remains a relation of otherness. Lévinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*: “experience means precisely the relation with the absolute other.”¹ Within the frame of that discussion, I will comment on the levinasian response to the fifth of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, and finally bring together Lévinas' thought and the neurological research of António Damásio. In the last section I will explore different ways to maintain the following paradox - surface has no depth: surface *is* depth.

Keywords: Otherness; experience; exteriority/interiority; sensibility.

1. Exteriority without interiority

Let us begin by asking: what meaning of exteriority serves Lévinas' thought? Bearing this question in mind, I propose three meanings of exteriority, and three ways of distinguishing them from interiority.

First, there is an exterior that contrasts with the interior in the sense that the physical, *external*, and publicly accessible domain is different from the psychical domain, the latter being only innerly accessible. To illustrate this first meaning, the bottle of water which is now before me and also available to your attention is said to be exterior to me and you, whereas the memories we will keep of it when we leave the room are said to be interior for each one of us.

Besides this natural exteriority, there is an exterior that contrasts with the interior in the sense that I am able to distinguish that which transcends me, that which I am not, from that which does not transcend me or is immanent to me. For example, in this second sense, the memory of this same bottle of water is also said to be exterior, while the *present experience* which makes me consciousness of that memory or even of the thing itself is termed immanent. In this second meaning, and despite considerable oscillation in its debate (which falls beyond the scope of this paper), the interior may correspond to that which in the field of philosophy of mind is commonly called *qualia*, in contrast with external *percepta*, i.e., the properties of the *experience of an object* in contrast with the properties of the *experienced object*. In Husserl's phenomenological research, this second meaning of the separation exterior/interior may also parallel the subjective experience of *Leib* (the living body, the flesh), in contrast with the objectivities (or transcendencies) that the concrete *self* (or *monad*, in the *Cartesian Meditations*) establishes in the intentional access of consciousness. An additional way of understanding this second meaning of exteriority is offered by Sartre, who states that the *Ego* itself is no less transcendent than any objectivities that consciousness accesses.

Third, there is an exterior which contrasts with the interior in an entirely different sense from those I have just mentioned, and stands even in opposition to them. In the first meaning, the psychical was defined as interiority in relation to the rest of the world. In the second meaning, interiority receded either to a primal sphere of belonging to a transcendental *ego* or to a nonegoic consciousness, a Sartrean *Soi* transparent to itself. Either way, a part of interiority as understood in the first meaning shifts towards exteriority as understood in the second meaning. The third meaning of exteriority does not imply receding further back to an even more primal interiority. Instead, there is a shift towards a radical exteriority, precisely that which corresponds to the third

meaning. In other words, the third meaning is about finding exteriority at the very core of subjectivity.

Lévinas brings to light the latter meaning of exteriority as a sort of tragic incident of the former ones. It is the meaning that pushes further the boundary with an interior, precisely because after it there is no further interior, there is no further land of comfort. Instead, and with fitting literary resonance, there is only a "waste land" that must signify something. As will be seen below, that exteriority is also what is further inside, so to speak, in place of that dispossessed interiority. It lies at the basis of any intentional Ego, even in a stage of "pre-consciousness". Finally, and surprisingly, that exteriority is right here, before my eyes, around my ears; it is the whole of experience we are exposed to.

Subjectivity as exteriority, exteriority as experience, exteriority irreducible to any mediating term which might give it meaning – giving meaning to such phrases is, for Lévinas, to find the other. Otherness is not a concept; it is even a non-concept, since any effort to circumscribe such a concept of it would be to cancel otherness. But it cannot be said to be a *non being* – it is experience, fundamentally experience, since it cannot be reduced to any concept, an irreducibility that concerns all experience while remaining experience. Hence the title proposed for this essay: *from otherness as experience to experience as otherness*.

2. Otherness as Experience

In *Totality and Infinity* Lévinas claims that only through "betrayal" could the other's otherness be trusted to intermediaries which in any way would redirect it to the same general being, as if the other affirmed itself as *other* precisely as an *alter ego*, an other like myself, a difference visible only below the previous marking of a same.

The primacy of the Same, Lévinas notes, originated in Socrates and became the unchallenged cornerstone of Ontology, understood as a reduction of the other to the Same. Heideggerian phenomenology did little more than establishing this "ontological imperialism" by choosing the being of entities (*das Sein des Seienden*) as the genuine intermediary of truth, with the ensuing underrating of the entity itself. According to Lévinas, the result must be a neutralization of the other's otherness, respected only in terms of a reciprocity that limits freedom, but does not justify it. This explains why an author like Sartre sees in the other a threat to one's freedom - if "hell is other people", it is because of an excess of the self's image, reflected in every other, or yet because every other is but a mirror of the self. To this Lévinas opposes the need to "liberate freedom from arbitrariness," to call it into question when face to face with the other, without sacrificing the other's irreducible exteriority. However, an unfair criticism of Sartre should be noted: when he says freedom is something we are condemned to that is not the reason that hell is other

people, as Lévinas appears to claim. More accurately, Sartre means that freedom presupposes responsibility and that the burden of responsibility weighs down as a condemnation - particularly because if we were not free we *could not*, and therefore *would not* have to bear the weight of responsibility. A fairer criticism might be that Sartre failed to acknowledge that the responsibility implied by freedom only makes sense in relation to the other. In other words, Sartre dissociated freedom from otherness.

But the problem of otherness, of the genuine experience of the other, is initially formulated in the 5th of the *Cartesian Meditations*, a landmark of phenomenology. Husserl writes: "The question necessarily presents itself: 'how can my ego, at the core of its own being, possibly constitute "the other" precisely as being alien to it?'" ²

And for Husserl this is not merely a problem of experiencing the other, their otherness, but also of experiencing the objective world, since according to the 5th of the *Cartesian Meditations* that world must be, for every one, an intersubjective world, formed by a transcendental "we". It follows that understanding the experience of that world implies an understanding of a presupposed experience of the other. In fact, this *Cartesian Meditation* is entirely devoted to such difficulties. From a phenomenological-transcendental point of view, it is a matter of knowing how it is possible, if indeed it is possible, to come to find the experience of an other in an elucidation of my own Ego. Husserl's suggestion, however, frustrates our expectation of attaining a genuine experience of the other, i.e., of the other in flesh and blood, of the other's self, without any intermediaries. Indeed, paragraph 51 reads that the other's *Leib* is *appresented* but not made *present*; and that this non-presence, which is to be understood as an absence, is not a contingency: it simply could not be otherwise. If I had as my experience the other's experience, then I and the other would be indistinguishable, and therefore there would not be experience of the other. Finally, it establishes that the *appresentation* of the other occurs by *coupling*, that is, by a configuration of pairs based on *association*, one of the primitive forms of passive synthesis. However, we may ask, under which conditions is such a coupling association possible? Husserl's solution reveals the crucial shortcoming of the *Cartesian Meditations* in two ways.

First, the fact must be considered that the coupling of the pairs occurs as a "unit of similarity", in which it is recognised that the possible experience of the other is an experience of resemblance, rather than one of otherness. This means there is no access to the other's subjectivity, but only access to the *self's subjectivity*. Besides, it means that the other's Ego, which is appresented by resemblance, is nothing but the self transferred onto the other (by *Sinnesübertragung*, a "transfer of meaning"). The experience of the *alter ego* is therefore nothing but the experience of the projection of my own self as other. As such, the experience of the other does not take place, and the genuine experience of subjectivity remains limited to that of the subject. The other does not

present itself in the flesh. That way, the self only has access to its own living body. The other's body is presumed and confirmed merely in the thesis of its existence, in a constant analogy, and nothing more.

All this makes clear that Husserl did not claim this analogical appresentation of the other to be a genuine experience of the other. On the contrary, it is Husserl's view that such a presenting experience does not take place. It may be argued that if it does take place it is merely as *experience of a non-experience*, experience of a frustrated expectation of experience.

As regards the coupling by resemblance which makes us constitute an *alter ego*, a second line of reasoning reveals a difficulty. Husserl writes: "In the case of association and of apperception of the *alter ego* by the ego, which is of crucial interest here, the coupling only takes place when the "other" enters the range of my perception."³ For Lévinas, this restriction of the experience of the other to a form of perception is precisely the obstacle to be removed.

Already in Husserl it is acknowledged that the other's otherness cannot be perceived, and yet for Lévinas the turning point lies in an experience of the other, but not an experience of the perceptive kind. A perception of the other, like any other perception, would imply the idea of a same, which would allow recognition of the perceived as such, or, in the case of otherness, recognition of the other by that which is like me in them. As such, otherness and experience reveal themselves to be close concepts: otherness as experience and experience as a form of otherness.

The problem with Husserl partially stems from a void, at least in his most established thought, regarding non-intentional consciousness (in opposition to, for instance, philosophy of mind's *qualia*; or, still in the context of a phenomenological approach, non-intentional, auto-affective, *invisible life*, to which Michel Henry's thought is entirely devoted).

But, actually, this return to a non-intentional consciousness is not enough, and neither does it solve the problem of the existence of the other. Returning to qualitative feeling, or to auto-affective inner life, rich in metaphorical meaning, is in fact to remain in the realm of recognition and of apperception, thus in the sphere of the theoretical and of its logic of sameness. Maybe, then, we can speak of pre-intentionality without an intentional object, but which is still constitutive.

In order to return to strictly experiential sensing, a first *epoché*, directed at an objectifying intentionality is not enough; a second *epoché* must follow, now directed at consciousness as intentionality.

At stake, fundamentally, is consciousness itself. Indeed, beyond objectivity and subjectivity, we find an experience which is prior to intentionality and even to consciousness. In other words, we find experience as radical, sensitive exposure, or susceptibility, vulnerability. This brings us to the third meaning of exteriority which I outlined at the beginning of this analysis. In my view, neither Husserl's intentional consciousness, nor Sartre's, nor Michel Henry's offer this meaning.

By highlighting the error of setting the question of otherness on a theoretical level, Lévinas reinstates it in philosophical debate. In *Totality and Infinity*, it is not an Ego, already consciousness and intentionality, that finds the other as an *alter ego*. That Ego, fundamentally private in its circular self-consciousness, can only invest itself in an other's body, can only suppose itself in the other. In Lévinas, it is the sensible subjectivity which finds the other and finds the other *precisely* as subjectivity, and not as intentional consciousness, even pre-intentional consciousness. And so the other can only be found as sensibility - never as consciousness or intentionality.

One may ask why sensibility and consciousness stand in opposition here. Sensibility as exposure is relation, direct relation, and the relational is said to be absolutely without relativity – the relational and the relative are mutually exclusive notions. Perceptions, even *qualia* - in fact, *all* kinds of perceiving activity, and therefore that of consciousness – imply an Ego, somehow refer to it, to its synthesis, even in the original passivity. As such, all that activity imposes the “relative to...” which excludes the relational. Hence the Levinasian retreat to an absolutely *ante-originel* exterior which rescues sensible subjectivity from theoretical repression. Quoting Lévinas in *Otherwise Than Being...*: “The skin-deep immediacy of sensibility – its vulnerability – is as if anesthetized in the process of knowing. But also, doubtless, repressed.”⁴

3. Experience as Otherness

Is there such a thing as experience without consciousness or intentionality?

António Damásio's neurobiological research and his scientific results afford a positive answer to this question. In particular, Damásio aims to dissociate mind from consciousness. This he achieves in the study of certain neurological pathologies, in cases where the inexistence of conscious life is evident, yet mental experiences unmistakably continue. From another angle, Damásio considers that phylogenetically, mentality is prior to consciousness. By this I do not mean that Damásio demonstrates Lévinas's findings, but the affinity is evident.

There is another reason for such an affinity. In agreement with the dissociation of mind from consciousness patent in *The Feeling of What Happens*⁵, Damásio additionally underscores the essentially organic nature of emotions. Far from being the physical expression of inner feelings, as if the latter preceded the former (such is how the relation between emotions and feelings is most intuitively construed), emotions are in fact *what feelings express*, precisely while consciousness of emotions. In short, the expressive source lies in an exteriority of which interiority is consciousness, and not the other way around. Not what literature, culture,

and philosophy have believed and avowed: that the source lay in interiority and that exteriority could only externalize that interiority.

And yet for Damásio emotions remain a biological, physiological feature, while for Lévinas they are closer to a sort of “no man’s land”, neither physical/natural (since already mental), nor psychological (since still without consciousness, perception, intentionality). Or maybe they are closer to the *waste land* I alluded to before.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. The status of first-order mappings, the emotions before consciousness occurs, is yet to be determined in the context of Damásio’s research. In fact, the shift from a *neural map* to a correlated mental pattern – and I am only referring to mentality – is precisely the problem which for Damásio himself remains to be solved. In this sense, the persistence of the mind/body problem, which is entirely unrelated to the problem of consciousness, in my view does not allow a clear identification of emotions with neural mappings. Emotions are organic, but this only means that mentality, too, is organic.

4. The depth of the surface.

Both the damasian revolution regarding the relation between emotions and feelings and the skin-deep levinasian sensibility point to the depth of the surface. As such, there appears to be a paradox. But the idea is that the depth which would be under the surface – *which it is not* – is found, in its meaning, at the surface. The paradox is only apparent: indeed, surface *is* depth.

Different modes of this signifying surface may be considered. For instance, consider the face, a central trope in levinasian thought. The naked face uncovers me and engages me as sensibility, vulnerability, exposure. We experience the face as passivity, yet cannot contain it in a representation. The experience of the other in their otherness is engaging, and so it also develops into an experience of singularity. Only vis-à-vis the other does my power to kill gain meaning, and this precisely because the other resists me in my sensibility, and the interdiction of killing overwhelms me. Moreover, there is only visible nakedness, only, one might say, sensible sensibility. Here Michel Henry’s invisible life is found to be as incompatible with Lévinas’ exteriority as was Heidegger’s being of the entity. There is nothing in a face but the surface of its skin, the wrinkles that outline a gaze or a smile, the shape of forehead frowning. And also a body, its way of walking, and its arms and legs. Gesturing behind the glass, the man in the phone booth who makes Camus wonder in *The Myth of Sisyphus* why he should exist, is nothing other than the depth of his excessive surface. The absurd occurs there only because depth, meaning, is expected from elsewhere than the surface.

With the expressiveness of the surface, hence depth, which does not indicate a non-superficial interiority, and through the idea of a *Dire sans*

Dit, a Saying without a Said, Lévinas brings forward a language that says before meaning is established in the Said. Accordingly, Lévinas distinguishes between *significance of the Saying* [*significance du dire*] and *signification of the Said* [*signification du dit*]. This prior saying is not intentional, since there is no attribution of meanings here. There is no Said without Saying; there is no Said which comprises Saying; and yet Saying *is*, regardless of the Said and of the non-said. Sincerity, for example, is not when the truth is told, but when exposure happens: "*Me voici!*"⁶, I am exposed, regardless of whatever is Said. Sincerity is already Saying, and therefore already language, Saying without a Said, *Dire sans Dit*.

But since the Said is also Surface, it can also be Saying. Words are not necessarily predetermined to the relative which excludes the relational, to the theoretical, to the ontological, or to the Same. To conclude, I will illustrate this with a brief poetic sample by Luíza Neto Jorge, the Portuguese poet.

In a group of poems whose title translates as "The Revolutions of Matter,"⁷ and countering the principle of economy which governs metonymy⁸, the poet uses a metonymical logic to make the surface of words signify beyond their meanings. I have selected two poem titles whose translation into English fortunately still fits the purpose of my example - *Sublimation: the sublime action*; and *Divisibility: Dual visibility*. If metonymy operates at phrase level, as Jakobson once claimed, then what the poet does here is to metonymize the former terms of the two titles. She does this not to achieve a synthesizing effect, but instead to *extend* the terms by pushing the meanings - Saussure's acoustic images - to signify in the proximity of the latter terms of the titles. And this obviously is not the meaning of the Said, but the Saying of the signifiers. *Sublimation* extended into *sublime action* and *divisibility* extended into *dual visibility* are revolutions of the matter of words, of physical bodies exposed to signification, to non-indifference. Over these inverted metonymies, over this Said, is metaphorized the movement of their making, and so it becomes at once Said and Saying, starting point and finishing point. Indeed, the titles become the metaphor of Saying itself, of the *Dire*.⁹

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¹ Levinas, E., 1961. *Totalité et infini – Essai sur l'extériorité*. Paris: Kluwer Academic, 2001 p. XII.

² Husserl, E., 1947. *Méditations cartésiennes*. Trad.: Gabrielle Peiffer & E. Levinas. Paris: Vrin, 1992, §44.

³ Husserl, E., *Méditations cartésiennes*, § 44.

⁴ Levinas, E., 1978. *Autrement qu'être – Ou au-delà de l'essence*. Paris: Kluwer Academic, 2004, p. 104.

⁵ Damasio, A., 1999. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the making of Consciousness*. Heinemann: London, 1999.

⁶ Lévinas, E. *Autrement qu'être*, pp. 225-7.

⁷ "As Revoluções da Matéria", Neto Jorge, Luíza, *Poesia*, ed. Cabral Martins, Lisboa: Assírio e Alvim, 1993, p. 115.

⁸ Cf. Taborda Duarte, Rita, "Cin(po)ética", *Relâmpago* (nº 18), 2006.

⁹ Recently, Danielle Cohen-Levinas and Bruno Clément published some Levinas' notes on metaphor. In these notes we find a deep consideration on the experience of the metaphorical meaning, in such a way that Levinas even says that God would be the metaphor of all metaphors. (Levinas, E. "Notes sur la Métaphore – Inédit d'Emmanuel Levinas" in Cohen-Levinas, Danielle & Clément, B., 2007. *Emmanuel Lévinas et les territoires de la pensée*. Paris: PUF, 2007, p. 39)