

THE OTHER IS DEAD

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ABSTRACT. The question is whether we can even speak about alterity in our current world, whether the meeting of the other is possible at all, and if it is, whether it should be discussed in an ontical-ontological, an ethical (Lévinas), or a social (Baudrillard) framework. In the “ecstasy of communication” (Baudrillard), the Other appears not as an autonomous person carrying an existential message, but as one of the elements of the system bridging the gap between the communicating parties. As soon as the world becomes a transparent network, the Other loses his transcendent character and is reduced to an insignificant hub in the network that unites the world. We cannot speak of authentic alterity in such a network-like world, as otherness has become an element within an arbitrarily shaped electronic system. An authentic Other is not even possible, since alterity can always be arbitrarily modeled with the necessary technological instruments in the playing field of production. Hence, the Nietzschean dictum “God is dead” receives a new interpretation in this context.

Keywords: self, other, alterity, communication, ecstasy, Baudrillard, Levinas

The phenomenology of otherness is not, and cannot be, 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 The monolithic definition of human essence according to uniform criteria seems one-sided and outdated today.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 confronted us with alterity and strangeness. Thus, one could even say that we can comprehend our own identity primarily through the experience of otherness.

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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*. At the same time, we also have our contemporary world with the “extases of communication”, which put the issue of alterity into a completely new perspective. In fact, the question is whether we can even speak about alterity in our current world, whether the meeting of the other is possible at all, and if it is, whether it should be discussed in an ontical-ontological, an ethical (Lévinas), or a social (Baudrillard) framework.

Historical occurrences of otherness

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

The explicit occurrence of otherness in Nietzsche

Alterity gradually became a central problem for 20th century philosophies. The issue was essential for French phenomenology, but it first reached prominence in Nietzsche's philosophy in a different context, which is also significant for our present research. In his *Gay Science*, he interprets our true identity under the category of the "mask". According to Nietzsche's own account, the issue of the actor preoccupied him for a long time.⁵ This actor is not someone alien to me, but an attendant of my everyday identity, the Other who lives inside me, through whom I can better understand myself and who offers me a mask that I can wear in order to appear before my own self.

The otherness in ourselves has perhaps never had such a great philosophical echo as it did in Nietzsche. The "mask" reflects the hypostases and developmental moments of the spirit for us, unique, but many-faceted humans. It suffices to refer here to the spiritual development of the "strong-willed individual" from *Zarathustra*, who reaches his or her own reality through the hypostases of the "camel", the "lion", and the "child". Nevertheless, this individual's reality contains an inborn potential, essentially belonging to her or him. The spirit could not proceed

⁴ My arguments here proceed from the paradigms laid down in the essay collection entitled *Figures de l'altérité* (Jean Baudrillard–Marc Guillaume: Descartes et Cie, 1994).

⁵ See E. Bertram: *Nietzsche: Attempt at a Mythology*. University of Illinois Press, 2009. 134

along this triple path, if its pre-given identity would not contain the potential developmental levels of all three states. The metaphysics of the self-transcending man would rest on poor soil, if the “herd man” would not always already contain the developmental potential of “growing” into a child.

What is the conclusion that can be drawn from the progression of the spirit as described by Nietzsche? Based on the metaphor of the “mask”, we may conclude to the mirror-like character of our selfhood and to the ontological compulsion of its inherent alterity’s development. Due to the possibility of the exponential development involved in his potentials, which are hidden in the depths of his selfhood, man is rather that which he can become. This conclusion, however, does not only carry an existential, but also a phenomenological relevance. The “mask” is the *Other* inherent in myself, who can manifest itself at any time, who raises obstacles before my self-understanding, and through whom I can ultimately come to understand myself. **My selfhood is ultimately developed through the labyrinth that lies at its heart.**

Hence, consequently assumed self-understanding has to welcome the possibility of becoming someone else. *The Gay Science* examines the forces involved in the creation of the transformed man. Modern man is, for Nietzsche, a mask-wearing being, but one who is not conscious of this fact. In the same way in which the masks used in Greek drama materially manifest essential existential situations, the aesthetic quality of the modern man is expressed in poetry and Wagnerian music (which is a topic for another discussion). From the largely implicit Nietzschean interpretation of otherness, we can infer to the peripheral position to which this metaphysical fact was relegated in the modern age.

Modernity’s reluctance toward alterity was paradoxical in the context of a pluralist Europe. Quite likely, the exhaustion of the human dimension through mutually opposed ontological and anthropological categories removed our selfhood from the assumption of inherent otherness. Insofar as Western man thought of himself within the rigid antithesis of the categories “us” and “them”, he held himself at a distance from the recognition of the qualitative aspects of alterity and from the understanding of the potential heterogeneity of his selfhood. The recognition of our identity’s many-faceted character is a merit of postmodernism, which builds upon diversification. Reversing the ancient metaphysical paradigm of “unity in multiplicity”, it eliminates to a certain measure the modern idea of a unified, historically given and largely unchanging selfhood. And to what result? Is it for a harmonious selfhood, or a many-faceted, schizophrenic consciousness that is almost incapable of harmonizing the mosaic aspects of alterity? I will attempt to answer this question in the following chapters of my essay.

The phenomenological aspects of the Ego/Alter ego in Lévinas

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 reinterpreter of her own life story⁶, experiencing the personal character of her own relationship to the world through the modalities of being together. I exist through my awareness

⁶ 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.

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.⁷

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.⁸

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.⁹ 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 depths of his identity that I

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas: *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*. The Athlon Press Ltd, 2006, 18.

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.¹⁰

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 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...¹¹

Through the communicative factors of language,¹² 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

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. 33.

¹² 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 Martin Heidegger: *Unterwegs zur Sprache*. Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 243.

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."¹³

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.¹⁴ 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 of the Other brings the problem of ethics to the foreground – encountering otherness, I immediately become responsible for it.¹⁵ 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*, Lévinas invokes certain aspects of the original metaphysics of the Gaze.¹⁶ It is the Gaze that reveals the essence of the

¹³ Ibid. 34.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ E. Lévinas: *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*. The Athlon Press Ltd, 2006. 109-128.

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.¹⁷ 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.

¹⁷ 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 Lévinasian *Gaze* returns me to my original state that is endangered by social alienation and formalism.

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*¹⁸; 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.

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.¹⁹ 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.

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).

¹⁸ The logic of intersubjectivity eliminates precisely this hermetic separateness of subjectivity.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 152.

The phenomenological construction and destruction of “otherness”

In his *Introduction* to the essay collection entitled *The Faces of Alterity*, Marc Guillaume states that otherness has become an obsessive theme of current European thought. Its frequent occurrence can quite likely be explained by the everyday confrontation with strangeness, difference, and xenophobia (occurring in the quasi-propagandistic context of social philosophy). The genesis of the problem of alterity is associated with the theoretical acceptance of an alterity which, although not understood, is responsibly related to our selfhood.

The newly-gained dominance of this issue within the self-understanding of European thinkers can be regarded as an important turn. While in the exclusivist centuries of modernity philosophers sought to access truth by the way of introspection, contemporary thinkers attempt to grasp the given state of humanity through *different* cultural topoi and through the comparative interpretation of *diversity*.

At the same time, this can also be regarded as a new approach and as a hermeneutical turn within our Western tradition. As against the thinkers of the past, who sought to relegate otherness to the domain of strangeness, sometimes even with xenophobic overtones, nowadays we seek to understand ourselves through the assimilation of the originality and individuality entailed in the Other's being. *Strangeness* and *diversity* cease to be represented as alienating/differentiating categories and become hermeneutically productive factors.

The theses associated with alterity often have to reckon with the category of radical otherness. The issue of alterity is far from being exhausted by diversity, but also hypostasizes the Other as the personified concretion of alterity, since otherness (*autrui*) lurks behind any specific Other (*autre*).²⁰ The surrender of the Other to the massification and leveling effect of alterity has become a common practice within our Western tradition, blinded by the forgetfulness of Being. If hitherto alterity was used in a general ontological sense, without establishing any special qualitative determinations, attention will now be turned to the Other as a being independent from myself, who nevertheless plays an essential role in the constitution of my own selfhood.

²⁰ The French word '*autrui*', according to its dictionary definition, signifies the totality of people different from ourselves, or, more simply put, 'others'. The semantic differentiation of the term '*autrui*' from '*autre*' is not self-evident. The Romanian translation does not differentiate between the two terms, using the words '*altui*' and '*celălalt*' for both. Nevertheless, a certain differentiation of the semantic nuances is indispensable for understanding Baudrillard's and Guillaume's text. In this respect, it should be noted that the term '*autrui*' does not have a plural form, and can only be applied to people.

At this point, we can complement and correct one of the observations of a previous chapter: modernity recognized alterity, but was unable to autonomously thematize the Other. It could even be said that modernity represents the process of assigning the individuality of the Other under the authority of otherness. It is true that alterity represents, in fact, one of the consequences of the intellectual achievements of the modern age, but it was unable to unfold thematically, since it manifested itself from the beginning under the aspect of an existentially stifling reduction.

The modern reduction of the Other to otherness means something more than the usual conceptual turn; we have to see something more in this suppression than an attitude of modern people toward that which is new. It is the intellectual understanding of the Other's identity that constitutes here the historically undesirable dominance of otherness. Under the impact of various meta-narratives and worldwide political ideologies, the Other becomes an enemy of the *Ego*, a nemesis of the established power, and a representative of the incomprehensible otherness. Ideological conflicts raised unbridgeable barriers between people, rendering any communion impossible from the very beginning.

What happens with the Other in a heterogeneous and pluralist, postmodern culture? Does the Other find its due social and ethical status in the postmodern age, so proud of its tolerance and openness toward diversity? Can our society, as it is structured into various subcultures, even offer the exploration of the values inherent in the Other's specific person, or, on the contrary, does the Other become a victim of the undifferentiatedness involved in axiological juxtaposition? For now, we can only speculate about these issues. I will offer an overwhelmingly negative response to these questions in the last chapter of this essay, insofar as – following Baudrillard – I see the individual in the age of anonymous openness as a victim of spectral culture, viewing him as a being who lost his ability to open himself up to otherness.

In his *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses a certain impatience and closedness that is inborn in us all and closes down the paths leading to the recognition of the Other. On the one hand, "hell is other people", while, on the other hand, Sartre also recognizes that the path toward our self-identity presupposes the stations of the Other's recognition. The dimensions of our Ego that are most isolated from the social sphere can also not avoid the directly self-manifesting aspects of alterity. As M. Guillaume says in his *Introduction to The Faces of Alterity*, we continuously encounter the facets of otherness in the social sphere, appearing under the guise

of delinquency, economico-political challenges, and cultural gaps. In our postindustrial world, the continuously emerging reality of pathology, religious conflicts, and technological terror repeatedly question the ethical boundaries of the Other's acceptance. The occurrences of alterity, often neighboring on abnormality, naturally cast doubt upon the ethical groundedness of our attitude as adjustable to the mere phenomenality of the Other. When our faith in the Other's trustworthiness is shaken, we immediately include it in the category of an alterity that is threatening.

The expansion of Western cultural idioms and the incorporation of formerly unknown, exotic stereotypes eventually led to the acceptance of unknown models, considered to be inferior to European norms. The culturalization of the Other simultaneously symbolizes, beyond its economic aspects, inequality and progress, as well as the sacrifice of the factors left unknown on the altar of knowledge.²¹ If, under the influence of political, economic, or military factors, I reduce the Other to alterity, then I will risk the projection of my own alterity within the essence of the Other. Essentially, alterity is the result of the projection of my current Self against the Other's *Ego*. This is where the great error of metaphysics related to the issue discussed here becomes clear, as metaphysics radically opposed alterity to self-identity, treating it as a heterogeneous quality compared to a given identity.²²

The principled suspension of the perception of alterity as inconvenient strangeness can be expected from the elimination of the alienating and essence-distorting function of otherness. According to Guillaume, the conceptual relationship between alterity and distortion can be broken through the step from the *Autre's* authority toward the world of the *Autrui*. This is nothing else than a humanization process which attributes a well-defined place and role to man within the world. So we can see that the issue of otherness somehow leads to a strong definition of the essence of "Man".²³ The essence of the alterity included in my identity points to an ethical concept of "man". As soon as my identity is constituted through the Other's

²¹ See R. Guidieri: *L'abandonance des pauvres*. Seuil, Paris, 1984, 189.

²² The misunderstanding of alterity in the modern age, conceived of as heterogeneous from my own identity, stems from the unilateral application of the rules of classical logic. We hardly begin to understand our own selfhood when transcending the requirements of bipolar logic that bursts the unity of the ontological sphere, as we begin to pay attention to the logic of Being according to the Heideggerian model, since its structure does not necessarily contrast our selfhood with alterity.

²³ Postmodernist humanism, assuming that one can speak of such an orientation, proceeded in the opposite direction, by developing a weak definition of human nature and by removing from it the world-centeredness of the axiology and the ethics of the modern age.

presence, there is an attitude that determines my selfhood that lies behind my attitude toward others. Thus, it is not a coincidence that the concept of *alterity* and *altruism* have the same root: “altruism is the moral value that has to enable the shortening, or even the elimination of the distance between the Ego and the Other...”²⁴

The cultural experience of otherness is context-dependent to the extent that the experience of the Other can even be regarded as a representative cultural topos, functioning as a measure of the openness and tolerance of individuals. Every historical age had its own characteristic modality of the historical experience of alterity. The attitude of humanity toward alterity changed according to historical age, race, and nation. During some historical periods, people viewed the Other as an incommensurable being that is irreducible to one’s own world of experiences, manifesting toward it the extreme attitude of brotherhood or xenophobia, while our current society conveys rather the experience of permissivity, indifference, and the dissolution of otherness within a misunderstood pluralism.

The breakdown of cultural and communicational barriers paradoxically delayed the intellectual acceptance of otherness. Moreover, it even seems that the openness toward alterity shows a decreasing tendency with the increase of the maneuver space in the other direction. Considering all these factors, we can draw the conclusion, along with Baudrillard, that alterity is a quite rare phenomenon in our contemporary world.

Searching for the phenomenological idea of alterity, we can realize that it is essentially an abstraction. Today, we are unable to grasp otherness as the people of modernity once did. In the mirror of the dichotomous thinking of modernity, alterity was a quality category that could be separated from and contrasted with a specific quality. Currently, it is the totality of the potential world interpretations, or, in an ontic context, of the identities that can be arbitrarily assumed by my selfhood.

The ontic status of the Other’s alterity becomes uncertain within the world of the “ecstasy of communication”. It is precisely the self-understanding of our own selfhood in the light of otherness that becomes problematic in the realm of open communication. While the dialogue with the Other was once viewed as a fortunate transcending of the *Ego*’s mechanism of self-enclosure, we have come to regard it today, in our world of communication, as a phenomenon generating the implosion process of consciousness.²⁵

²⁴ Baudrillard–Guillaume: op. cit. 11.

²⁵ See *ibid.* 62–65.

Our current social processes seem to demonstrate that, in parallel with the unfolding of the openness toward alterity, we can also witness the increasing internal loneliness and the emptying out of isolated individuals, as quality relationships also tend to become shallower. This growing isolation hides in its background the paradox of communication: the qualitative/technological enrichment of communicative relationships implies the impoverishment of the communicative situation's content aspect. One could even say that openness leads, paradoxically, to alienation, if we interpret *alienation as a break in the vital relationship with reality, ending in an unnatural and pathological self-enclosure; although, as we will shortly see, even alienation was not really granted to us.*

At this point, it is worth to mention Baudrillard's consideration,²⁶ according to which, in the age of satellites, our world is reduced to a transparent marble, whose points can be traversed over in any desired sequence, and which hardly contains any novelty or unknown element. In such a transparent world, alterity as something differentiated from my personal identity loses the natural message value and the challenging character that are hidden in strangeness.

In the ecstasy of communication, the Other appears not as an autonomous person carrying an existential message, but as one of the elements of the system bridging the gap between the communicating parties. As soon as the world becomes a transparent network, the Other loses his *transcendent* character and is reduced to an insignificant hub in the *network* that unites the world. We cannot speak of authentic alterity in such a network-like world, as otherness has become an element within an arbitrarily shaped electronic system. An authentic Other is not even possible, since alterity can always be arbitrarily modeled with the necessary technological instruments in the playing field of production.²⁷ The Nietzschean dictum "God is dead" receives a new interpretation in the context of the ecstasy of communication: *the Other is dead.*

Our contemporary world, so proud of its openness, has in fact limited the outlook opportunities of the individual: *if you are permanently outside (ek-stasis) you have nowhere to look out to.* That is the meaning of "ecstasy of communication" and this is how the meaning of the idea according to which everyone lives in their

²⁶ Cf. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* in: *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. 147.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 146.

own cell²⁸ has to be understood, and not in the sense of closing in upon oneself. In this context, the confrontation with the Other is both socially (Baudrillard) and ethically (Lévinas) questionable.

In my essay entitled *Selfhood at the Fragile Border of (Ab)normality* I “call for a paradigm shift in the interpretation of abnormality and especially schizophrenia, which we have so far interpreted as alienation and a break within the vital relationship to reality.”²⁹ „Because of the basic character of our age, we have to look for the framework of interpretation for schizophrenia within the consciousness processes described by passive synthesis and the “thrownness into the world” of Dasein. In our times, the openness of consciousness and Dasein has become limitless: we are all too open to everything, and we live too close to everything, without any borders to delimit and define our selfhood.”³⁰ “We can say then: the Other, or more exactly, what’s left of it, has been degraded into the consequence of mental functions, having a heterogeneous content. In this “absolute proximity” and “total instantaneousness” of the Other, as a result of original nondifferentiation...³¹ *We approach too closely everything, while we constantly move farther away from ourselves. There is no value-carrying alterity, no objectuality, only stage, vision, space which incorporates the interdependent elements of the network, and, not least, the intrusive mass of images.*”

The reduction of alterity from proper spatial relations to internal, cognitive and cerebral functions leads to the atrophy of imagination.³² The widening of the village into a metropolis and the shrinking of the formerly impenetrable world into a traversable “marble” rendered imagining the enchantment of alterity, that was rooted in its inaccessibility, obsolete. It could even be argued, with only a slight exaggeration, that alterity which is easily accessible and producible is not authentic alterity at all. If establishing the contact with strangeness does not encounter any

²⁸ Baudrillard, *L'autre par lui-même*. Editions Galilée, 1987.

²⁹ Attila Kovács: *Selfhood at the Fragile Border of (Ab)normality*, *Studia Universitatis, Philosophia*, 3/2016, 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 20.

³¹ *Ibid.* 21. “The use of the concept “original” seems somewhat strained here, since there is a difference between the original openness to the world made possible by disposition and the schizophrenic openness which stems from the specifics of our time. Although the former kind of openness can also be called schizophrenic, since it recognizes the existence of an effect, or “affection”, which takes place within ourselves, but is not initiated by ourselves, respectively, it also acknowledges our “confrontation” with that which simultaneously transcends us, the two concepts differ from each other from the perspective of originality.”

³² Cf. Baudrillard: *L'autre par lui-même*. Editions Galilée, 1987.

obstacle, the need to address the Other weakens. What is the use of the effort directed at imagining strangeness if one only has to activate the necessary element of the worldwide *web*? Communication, virtual reality, and social media have eliminated the Other in the sense of the virtual as imagination and potentiality: “others do not exist virtually anymore”. At the same time, paradoxically, the Other only exists virtually, but now in the sense of the artificial, simulacrum world that is created through digital technology.

Thus, as a final conclusion, we could cite Thomas Mann’s sentences, in which the words “love” and “faithfulness” could easily be replaced with Otherness (and also with Selfhood): “And he circled with watchful eye the sacrificial altar, where flickered the pure, chaste flame of his love; knelt before it and tended and cherished it in every way, because he so wanted to be faithful. And in a little while, unobservably, without sensation or stir, it went out after all. But Tonio Kröger still stood before the cold altar, full of regret and dismay at the fact that faithfulness was impossible upon this earth.”³³

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³³ Thomas Mann: *Death in Venice*, Tonio Kroger, and Other Writings. German Library, 2003, 15.

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