

A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled “Issues Confronting the Post-European World” and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.

Essay 2

Givenness and Alterity

© James Mensch

jmensch@stfx.ca

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et la pensée postmoderne

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Abstract

One of the most difficult problems faced by phenomenology is the mystery of our self-showing. How do we show ourselves to be what we are? How do we manifest our selfhood to one another? In this paper, I examine what we intend when we direct ourselves to another person. I am also going to look at what sort of fulfillment—i.e., what kind of givenness—satisfies this intention. There are here a number of possibilities. The givenness of what we intend can exactly match our intentions. It can be other than what we intend as when we see that we are mistaken. It can be less. It can, for example, not offer the detail that was part of our intentions. There is also the possibility that the givenness of what we see exceeds our intentions. In showing itself, the object offers us more than what we had in mind. I am going to defend the claim that this excessive givenness happens *systematically* when we intend another person. To intend another person is, paradoxically, to intend the other as exceeding our intentions. As such, the showing which manifests the presence of the other is a kind of “supersaturated givenness.” It is a givenness that makes us aware that more is being given than we can formulate in our intentions. This awareness points to the other’s freedom. It is also a moral awareness. My paper will conclude by arguing that our awareness of the other’s excessive givenness is our entrance into morality.

Introduction

If we trace the word phenomenon to its Greek origin, we find it is the participle of the verb, *phainesthai*, “to show itself.” The phenomenon is that which shows itself; it is the manifest. As Heidegger noted, phenomenology is the study of this showing. It

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examines how things show themselves to be what they are.¹ One of the most difficult problems faced by phenomenology is the mystery of our self-showing. How do we show ourselves to be what we are? How do we manifest our selfhood to one another? To put these questions in the Husserlian context of intention and fulfillment is to ask: What do we intend when we direct ourselves to another person? What sort of fulfillment—i.e., what kind of givenness—satisfies this intention? Once we speak in terms of intention and fulfillment, we face a number of possibilities. The givenness of what we intend can exactly match our intentions. It can be other than what we intend—as is the case when we are simply mistaken. The givenness also can be less. It can, for example, not offer the detail that was part of our intentions. Finally, givenness can exceed our intentions. In showing itself, the object offers us more than what was intended. In this paper, I am going to defend the claim that this excessive givenness happens *systematically* when we intend another person. To intend another person is, paradoxically, to intend the other as exceeding one's intentions. As such, the showing which manifests the presence of the other is a kind of "supersaturated givenness." It is a givenness that makes us aware that more is being given than we can formulate in our intentions. This awareness points to the other's freedom. It is also a moral awareness. Here, I will argue that our awareness of the other's excessive givenness is our entrance into morality.²

I.

In continental philosophy, we have long been accustomed to thinking of the other, not in terms of givenness, but rather the reverse. We think of the other as not being able to be given. The argument for doing so is rather straightforward. Let us suppose that in intending the other, I intend his actual self-presence. The goal of my intending would then be a literal looking through the other's eyes. What I would really want to grasp would be how the world appears to this person, that is, what he sees, thinks and feels. As is obvious, were this goal fulfilled, our two consciousnesses would merge. A consciousness that was fully present would not be other, but would rather be part of my own. This means that the very success of my intention in finding a corresponding fulfillment would rob it of its intended object, which is, after all, not

1 Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 85.

2 This concept is related to what Marion calls a "saturated phenomenon." According to Marion, this also involves "an excess of intuition over the concept or the signification." ("On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion" in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, ed., John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 69). Where I differ from Marion is in not assuming that such a phenomenon implies a departure from being. It seems to me that the notion of being is wider than that of being an object. For Marion, however, saturated phenomena "cannot be described either as object or as being. (pp. 70-71).

myself but rather someone else. Given this, I cannot say that such self-presence is the object of my intention. Rather, the other who I intend is, as Sartre has argued, someone who escapes my intentions. The other is the person that I can never bring into presence.³ In intending the other as other, I must, therefore, intend the other as an absence or a nongiveness.⁴ The difficulty with this view may be put in terms of Derrida's phrase, "*tout autre est tout autre*," every other is totally other. To the point that the other escapes givenness, how do I distinguish him? How is this other different from any other?⁵ Even more radically, how can the other appear at all? As Derrida notes, ". . . it is impossible to encounter the alter ego . . . if this other, in its alterity, does not appear . . . One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other, if there was not a phenomenon of the totally other, or evidence of the totally other as such."⁶

Given this, what do we intend in intending the other? For Derrida, the fact that we can intend neither the self-presence nor the absence of the other, leaves us with an aporia. It is an example of philosophy, with its metaphysical prejudices and language, posing problems that it can never solve. Such a conclusion, however, assumes that the givenness we intend is actually that of the consciousness of the other, a consciousness that can never become present. There is, however, another alternative. We can say that the other whom I intend manifests himself through his behavior. The givenness of this behavior exceeds that of a mere thing. It also exceeds my own appearing presence. Intending it, I, thus, intend an excessive presence. In his actions (his comportment in the broad Heideggerian sense of the term), the other gives himself as both like and not like myself. He behaves generally as I do, but not in any strictly predictable way.

3 As Sartre puts this, "What I must attain is the Other, not as I obtain knowledge of him, but as he obtains knowledge of himself. This would in fact suppose the internal identification of myself and the other." (*Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press, 1968, p. 317). Given that this is impossible, we have to say: "The other is the object of empty intentions, the Other on principle refuses and flees." This is because to intend the Other as other is to intend "a full intuition of an absence" (p. 318).

4 It is because of this nonpresence that Levinas can speak of "the rupture of phenomenology, which the face of the other calls forth." In referring to what cannot appear, "the face does not cease, in its enigma or ambiguity, to tear itself away from and make exception to the plastic forms of the presence and objectivity that it nonetheless calls forth . . ." ("Diachrony and Representation," in *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994, p. 107).

5 For Derrida, this inability to distinguish between others who are totally other, condemns "the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty . . . to paradox, scandal, and aporia." If "every other (one) is every (bit) other [*tout autre est tout autre*],"—i.e., if, "everyone else is completely or wholly other," how can I sort out my ethical obligations to them? (*The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 68).

6 "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 123. At issue here, according to Derrida, is the very possibility of Levinas's language: "Levinas . . . deprives himself of the very foundation and possibility of his own language. What authorizes him to say 'infinitely other' if the infinitely other does not appear as such . . . ?" (p. 125).

There is always a certain excess in what he shows me. He is not limited to the projections I make from the locus of my comportment. To intend the other as manifesting this quality is, paradoxically, to intend the inadequacy of one's intention. The intention directs itself towards a fulfillment that will exceed it. Its object is an exceeding givenness. To give a temporal cast to this is to note that this exceeding is towards the future. The real future—the future that distinguishes itself from the past—does not just repeat it. I do not anticipate it simply as a projection of what I have already experienced. It is present to me as an openness to the new, as an exceeding of the intentions that I form on the basis of my past experience. This presence of the future is, in fact, the presence of the other, i.e., his exceeding givenness. The other will be what he or she will be, not simply what I determine and anticipate from my perspective.

II.

The presence of this givenness is, in fact, the presence of freedom. In its “excess,” we have, in fact, the phenomenological ground of three mutually implicit concepts: alterity, freedom, and futurity. “Alterity” shows itself in the fact that the other shows himself as other than what I project from my perspective. He or she exceeds the intentions that are based on this. As just noted, this very exceeding manifests the openness of the future. Freedom is implicit here, since as other than what I can determine or predict from my perspective, the other shows himself as free from my control. The open horizon of the behavior that I confront in regarding him points to the other as exercising his own control of his comportment. The margin of his autonomy that constitutes his freedom is phenomenologically present to me in the excess of his givenness—i.e., in his exceeding the intentions by which I attempt to determine what he will do or say. Alterity, here, is thus experienced as the alterity of agency. As such, it is experienced as the very otherness that opens up the future.⁷

If we define the objective world as the world that is there for all of us, then its givenness also has an exceeding quality. This is because when we take the world as present both to ourselves and to others, we intend it as fulfilling not just our own, but also the intentions of these others. Insofar as such intentions exceed our own, so do the corresponding fulfillments. As a result, the givenness of the objective, intersubjective world is always excessive. The “*es gibt*”—i.e., the “there is”—of this world manifests newness. It exhibits a givenness beyond what we intend. The easiest way to see this is

⁷ Levinas also asserts, “The other is the future.” The basis of this claim for Levinas is, however, quite different. According to Levinas, what links the Other and the future is their sheer alterity. He writes, “the future is what is in no way grasped. ... the future is ... what befalls and lays hold of us. The other is the future. The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future” (“Time and the Other,” pp. 76-7). My view is that futurity is manifest in the other's behavior. It is present in the excess such behavior manifests beyond what we intend.

in terms of the behavior that intentions animate. Others act and surprise us. As a result of their actions new situations arise, situations we could not have anticipated. The exceeding givenness manifested by their behavior carries over to the results of this behavior—i.e., to the actual course of the intersubjective world. The novelty that confronts us is not the result of our ignorance. It is not as if, were we to increase our knowledge of the natural, nonhuman world even further, our predictive powers would somehow become adequate to account for our others. Rather, as long as such others remain other, their givenness must remain excessive. In fact, since the very notion of the objective (as opposed to the solipsistic) world presupposes others, we cannot appeal to a knowledge of this world to rid ourselves of this excess.

Although I have been using the word “others” to refer to other persons, the concepts of alterity, freedom, and futurity also have a theological sense. God, as Anselm points out, is not just “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” To intend God is to intend “something greater than can be thought” or intended by us.⁸ As exceeding our intentions, God’s presence is excessive. Like that of man, this excess manifests itself in the openness of his freedom, an openness that makes his future a real future. What this means concretely is that God will not be pinned down by us. When Moses asks his name, God answers ambiguously, “*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*” (Ex. 3:14). This phrase can mean either “I am what I am” or “I will be what I will be.” His name, God repeats to Moses is “*Ehyeh*”—“I am” or “I will be.”⁹ The implication is that he *is* what he *will be*. His being is such that he will exceed our expectations. He cannot be reduced to them. This exceeding is both his alterity and freedom. Thus, neither Moses nor the Israelites nor any individual or group of people can know what the future holds with regard to their relationship with God. The intention to God, like that to another person, involves excess. To the point that it is other directed, it must intend its own surpassing.¹⁰

8 “Therefore, Lord, not only are you that than which nothing greater can be thought, but you are also something greater than can be thought (*quiddam maius quam cogitari possit*). For since it is possible to think that there is such a one, then, if you are not this same being, something greater than you could be thought—which cannot be” (“Proslogion,” ch. 15, in *St. Anselm’s Proslogion*, trans. M. J. Charlesworth, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1965, p. 137).

9 Both translations are given by *The Torah, The Five Books of Moses*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962, p. 102.

10 Because of this, one cannot really speak of religion as an “economy”—i.e., as a matter of exchange where one does something for God and binds him to do something in return. Derrida’s critique of religion in this regard ignores the openness of the relation to God. See *The Gift of Death*, pp. 111-115.

III.

There is a moral dimension to this intending the other as other. It shows itself in the somewhat comical mistake of confusing a mannequin with a person. The confusion can go two ways. Expecting to meet a person, you can cross a department store to speak with what appears to be a well dressed sales woman standing near a counter. As you approach, however, you realize your mistake. The mannequin does not return your gaze; if spoken to, she does not respond. Thus, expecting to encounter a person, the mannequin you do experience offers you *less* than you intend. To reverse this, when you expect to experience a mannequin and encounter, instead, a person, you are offered *more* than you intend. When this happens, you feel immediately embarrassed by a lack of the appropriate intentions. You accidentally treated the person as a thing, as incapable of independent observation or action. Because you should have been expecting more, you behaved inappropriately.

The tie between your behavior and what you intended to see may be put in terms of Husserl's assertion that "perception is interpretation." By this, Husserl means that every intending to see involves an interpretation of what we do see.¹¹ In fact, the interpretation guides the behavior that accomplishes the perception. Thus, to see a three-dimensional object, I do not limit myself to one position, but either turn the object or shift my location to view its other sides. By contrast, to view a photograph, I limit my motion to attaining an appropriate viewing distance. I do not attempt to see it from behind. As these examples indicate, there is a correlation between the interpretative intention that animates the seeing and the disclosive behavior that it guides. The embarrassment we feel when we mistake a person for a thing points to the fact that there are limits to our behavior towards others that we do not have with regard to things. These limits are inherent in the exceeding quality of the intention to the other. The intention itself, in guiding the behavior, makes some actions appropriate and others inappropriate. In making me limit my behavior, the intention imposes an ethical aspect on my encounter with the other.

How does the intention accomplish this? The answer comes from the tie between self-limitation and freedom. The excessive givenness I intend in directing myself to the other is, as noted, the givenness of the other *as free*. It is in intending this freedom that I limit my own behavior. My own freedom, however, is implied by the

11 As Husserl puts this: "Outer perception is interpretation, thus the unity of the concept demands that inner perception, be such. It belongs to perception that something appears within it, but interpretation makes up what we term appearance—be it correct or not, anticipatory or overdrawn. The house appears to me through no other way but that I interpret in a certain fashion actually experienced contents of sensation. I hear a barrel organ—the sensed tones I interpret as barrel organ tones. Even so, I perceive via interpretation what mentally appears in me, the penetrating joy, the heartfelt sorrow, etc. They are termed 'appearances' or, better, appearing contents precisely for the reason that they are contents of perceptive interpretation" (Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen*, ed. Ursula Panzer, the Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984, Husserliana, XIX/2, 762 [my translation]).

self-limitation that characterizes my encounter with the other. It is, in fact, the basis of my own claim to be morally responsible. Let me take this last point first. At its basis is the common insight that we hold people morally responsible only to the extent that we consider them free. People are morally responsible only for their voluntary actions. As Kant realized, behind this insight is the fact that freedom itself is a ground of morality. This is because the limitations imposed by morality must be self-limitations. To the point that they are external, i.e., consist of sanctions and rewards, the person determined by them is not acting voluntarily. When his fear of the sanction or hope of the reward departs, we have no reason to expect that his moral behavior will continue. Given this, we have to say that the ground of a person's ethical actions must lie in himself. As the author of his actions, he must freely choose to limit his own behavior.¹²

The nature of this limitation *vis à vis* others arises from the freedom we intend in directing ourselves towards them. To intend another's freedom is to intend him as an author of his actions. As such, it raises the question of whether the other could authorize your actions. Would he consent to your treating him in this way? Would he, for example, authorize your lying to him? Can you assume that he would make this an object of his will? If not, then to intend him as free is to limit your behavior in this regard. Thus, to return to my example, when I suddenly discover that an object is a person and not a mannequin, my behavior changes. In giving himself as free, the person sets a limitation to my treatment of him. This is a limitation that I, in recognizing my own freedom, impose upon myself. Kant expresses this limitation in a formulation of his categorical imperative: "act so that you treat humanity either in yourself or others as an end and never simply as a means." Concretely, this means that I cannot treat him as a thing. In those actions that the other could not authorize, freedom sets him apart as inviolable, as not to be touched.

Once again there is a religious parallel—here with the sacred in the sense of the Greek root of the Latin, *sacer*: *soös*. The Greek word means "safe," in the sense of kept apart or reserved for the divinity.¹³ As consecrated to the god, the sacred cannot be used by us. One cannot, for example, cut down and use the timber of a sacred grove. The trees forming the grove are inviolate. One should not, in fact, even enter the grove. Thus, as Sophocles has the stranger say to Oedipus who has strayed into a sacred place, "It is forbidden to walk on that ground ... It is not to be touched."¹⁴ A

12 *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. IV, 435; trans. H. J. Paton, New York: Harper and Row, 1964 p. 100.

13 *A Latin Dictionary*, editors Lewis and Short, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 1610.

14 "Oedipus at Colonus," lines 36ff, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, in *Sophocles I*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954, p. 81.

similar sense of the sacred is present in God's encounter with Moses.¹⁵ In both cases, we have to do with the exceeding quality of the appearing of the divine. The presence of the divinity sets limits to my behavior and, hence, to the interpretative intentions that animate what I do and say. Facing the divine, my intentions are controlled by a context that I do not set. I am not master of the sacred. The sacred, here, is first. I, in my intentions, am second. It calls to me. I have to respond.¹⁶

The ethical character of the encounter that makes me second can be seen by recalling the example of the mannequin. The mannequin offers me less, while the person offers me more than what I intend. I expected the mannequin that I took to be a person to respond to me; when I took the person for the mannequin, I was surprised that I had to respond. The difference points to the fact that in confronting a person, the relation of intention to fulfillment suffers a reversal. Encountering the other, I am called upon in my response to fulfill his intentions. The exceeding character of my intention to the other is based on this fact. Thus, the intention that intends its own exceeding is actually an intending, a stretching forth, that awaits. Here, to intend is not to interpret, but rather to suspend the interpretative act till the other gives the lead. If, as Husserl asserts, perception is interpretation, then what we have here is a waiting to perceive. In this waiting, we acknowledge the inviolability, the sacred character of the other person. The other has authority in the sense that we accept him as the author of his own intentions. His givenness as an author is excessive in the sense that it exceeds the simple perceptual givenness that yields the semblance of the lifelike mannequin. For all that, he does not give himself as an absence. He exceeds perceptual givenness by exceeding the interpretation we place on it. The excess is *his interpretation*, the very interpretation that, in animating his behavior, meets ours and calls on us to respond.

To intend the other is then to intend to heed this very call. The intentionality that directs itself to the other is accordingly a form of responsibility. It is a stretching forth that responds to the authority or autonomy of the other. Engaging in it, we take responsibility for our own behavior. We exercise our autonomy to bind ourselves to listen. What we heed over and beyond what is said is, to use Levinas's term, the "saying" of the other. The excessive givenness of such "saying" points to the authority of the other, the other as always capable of adding to the "said," to the already interpreted, to the already accomplished. Our awareness of this excess is, in fact, our entrance into morality.

15 As the Bible relates their initial encounter, "... God called to him out of the [burning] bush: 'Moses! Moses!' He answered, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.... And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God' (Exodus, 3:4-6, in *The Torah*, p. 102).

16 Thus, when God appears to Job, he says: "... it is my turn to ask questions and yours to inform me" (Job, 38:3, in *The Jerusalem Bible*, Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1966, p. 772).