Guest Editor’s Preface: The Experience of the Alien and the Philosophy of Response

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0. Introducing the Author

This issue of “Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics” collects international and interdisciplinary contributions devoted to the thought of one of the most original and renowned contemporary masters in phenomenology: the German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels.¹

Waldenfels’ philosophical orientation – characterized both by a close dialogue with the doctrine of his French master Maurice Merleau-Ponty and a thorough confrontation with thinkers such as Husserl, Foucault, Levinas, Ricoeur and Derrida² – can be traced back to that constellation of thinking which, by putting at its center the phenomenon of intersubjectivity, attempts to show how every domain of human experience is faced by a constitutive intervention of alterity as an element calling for constant questioning and inevitable transformations.

Within this paradigm, Waldenfels offers, however, an undoubtedly original contribution, since he does not remain at the level of a general doctrine of otherness, but rather: by exactly “bending” the category of alterity towards the notion of alienness (Fremdheit), he charges the other with a peculiar factical density, which frees it from the latent risk of a mere logical-ontological opposition to the category of the same. Hence, through this philosophical twist, Waldenfels proposes a genuine phenomenological discourse, which, by avoiding the abstract duality otherness/sameness, places the other on the very plural and unstable terrain of factical experience.

¹ I would like to express here my gratitude to the editorial board of the journal for having accepted the publishing of this issue devoted to Bernhard Waldenfels’ philosophy. Equal gratitude goes also to all contributors, without whose scientific effort this project would have never been realized.

It is exactly this constitutive plural character of experience, in which alienness is constantly involved, what makes Waldenfels’ phenomenology particularly open to confrontations with several discourse domains. We can recall here his dialogue with and responses from disciplines like psychology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, pedagogy, ethnology, sociology, political theory, ethics, theology, legal studies, linguistics, as well as architecture and arts (in its several expressions).

There is no need to spend here much more effort in order to assert the dialogical and open character of Waldenfels’ phenomenology of alienness, as its evidence – I believe – is absolutely well disclosed by the very broad domain of contributions gathered in this issue. What I would like to provide, instead, is a general orientation map for the readers who approach Waldenfels’ thought for the first time, and this with the hope to offer them, firstly, the indispensable tools in order to better appreciate the essays collected here and, secondly, a good reason for starting an independent research path within the work of this master in phenomenology.

1. The Role of Alienness Within Experience

Waldenfels’ whole phenomenological effort is centered on a very clear and strong point of departure: as long as we assume the phenomenon of the *alien* in terms of “something” or “someone”, i.e. as an unproblematic accessible object of research, which stays more or less in front of us, we will have missed it from the start. In this case, indeed, our attitude, despite its willingness to being open or its inclination to repulsion towards the alien, would keep following the traditional structure of thought, according to which “alienness” is certainly admitted, however, only under a clear premise: *alien* can only be thought of starting from the sphere of property, the sphere of the *own*, that is, a realm to which indubitable ontological priority and hierarchical superiority are to be ascribed. By following this perspective, what would be inevitably affirmed is that consolidated interpretation of experience, according to which the alien, for how much it might represent a destabilizing moment within the own, is nevertheless bound to undergo a process of final overcoming and re-appropriation, thanks to which, in the end, the presupposed and unquestioned priority of the own itself is reestablished.

This kind of unquestioned certainty, which gives a clear priority to the own, is the attitude underlying all the traditional operations of thought which, while on the one hand foresee an indubitable participation or intervention of the alien, on the other hand return too easily to the own self,
since nothing can really question the own, if the own is guaranteed a higher originarity (*Ursprünglichkeit*) since the beginning. Just to quote some examples of this traditional attitude, we may refer to Hegel’s dialectic, in which alienness appears only as *Entfremdung*, i.e. as a transitory form in a process in which consciousness tends to “overcome the being alien” and “discover” the world and the present as its “own property”.\(^3\) This is also the case of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, whose task, despite its weaker pretentions if compared to the Hegelian project, remains the overcoming of the alien, that is, the recovery of comprehension as a more originary condition, in which the ownness of sense is to be presupposed to every interruption produced by an alien incomprehension.\(^4\) The same strategy is also at work in the Habermas’ communication discourse which, starting from the presupposition of a common logos, common sense and communicative reason, does not allow the intervention of any radical alien, but only the participation of a relative alien,\(^5\) who can therefore always be part of a successful strategy of inclusion.\(^6\) In this sense, Habermas’ communicative strategy, by founding itself on the premise of a given symmetrical reciprocity of the participants, far from giving itself as an “inter-realm of dialogue”\(^7\) between own and alien, works as a monologue put into scene dialogically.\(^8\)

Precisely here Waldenfels inserts his main critical warning: speaking of alienness does not coincide by any means with the mere addressing of an accessory moment, a transactional stage or a simply depriving modification of a nevertheless solid and only slightly alterable sphere of ownness. On the contrary, if something like a genuine experience of the alien is to be assumed at all, then the alien has to be conceived of in constitutive terms, that is, as an originary *pathos*\(^9\) which involves the own since the beginning and,

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\(^9\) *Pathos* represents one of the principal guiding concepts around which Waldenfels insists starting from his book *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*. A resuming but poignant reprise of this theme can be found in the recent monograph: Id., *Sinne und Künste im Wechselspiel. Modi Ästhetischer Erfahrung*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2010, pp. 323-325.
therefore, time and again. In other words: the alien, by involving ownness from the very start, reappears in the sphere of the own every time that the own undergoes the experience or the event of an alteration bringing it out of itself. In more accurate terms, such a pathic alteration manifests itself in forms like experienced withdrawal, expropriation, displacement, differing; forms which make impossible for the own to be – as Freud would say – “master in its own house”.

What Waldenfels calls for is, hence, a perspective inversion, according to which it is to be considered as a major phenomenological mistake to presuppose the original condition of a solid self-referential experience, in which something “alien” would occasionally and extrinsically happen. Rather, it is precisely the alien that which sneaks into experience since the beginning and makes, therefore, any process of total appropriation impossible.

2. The Places of Alienness

When it comes to detecting the phenomenon of the alien in terms of originary withdrawal, differing or non-coincidence in the realm of the own, Waldenfels, as radical phenomenologist, does not make use of any speculative instruments, but rather looks at decisive places of experience, in which all of us are concretely involved. The first one of such places is temporal experience, which goes back “to the primordial fact of birth, to an original past, a past ‘which has never been present’ (Merleau-Ponty) and will never be present, in that I always arrive too late in order to catch it in flagrante”. The same can be said of the experience of the proper name, which is actually “a name through which others call us, which we respond to and haven’t decided to give to ourselves” but “have received from others as a brand”. A similar logic turns out to be as work as soon as we think of the

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., p. 30.
constitutive fact that “it has been spoken to me before I spoke to others”. This primordial condition has an extraordinary relevance, since it represents the very genealogical basis both for any further genuine intersubjective experience, in terms of a radical being-exposed to the other, and for the learning of any further foreign language, which clearly does not start at school, but rather in the apprehending of the mother tongue as a first foreign language. A last example of how the alien intervenes in the midst of the most proper and intimate sphere of the own is given by the experience of the mirror. In such an experience we unavoidably look at ourselves through a stranger’s eyes and, therefore, we undergo an inevitable moment of non-recognition, hesitation, and – in extreme cases – even surprise or fright, which “would be inconceivable if ‘I’ were simply ‘I’ or if I could always fully return back to myself”. Far from attesting an original self-reference of the own self, this kind of experience testifies, indeed, in the very best manner what Waldenfels often communicates through quoting the famous Rimbaud’s refrain: JE est un autre.

Waldenfels, however, locates his constitutive presence of alienness within the own not only in the realm of “subjective” experience, but also at a more extended level, which concerns the orders of experience, in whose domain our lives acquire their general meanings and orientation. Orders, in fact, are also constitutively inhabited by alienness, in that the very operation by which they are instituted is a selective one. In other words, every order, by detaining its structural feature in the fact that it makes “appear something so and not otherwise”, makes possible, accessible and “proper” something by simultaneously making impossible, inaccessible and “alien” something else. Thus, order as such always draws inclusive borders by marking simultaneously the margin of its overcoming or transgression. In this context, the alien, by representing that which constitutively “withdraws itself from the order’s grasp”, can be conceived of as the extra-ordinary, which exceeds, surmounts and, therefore, can constantly put into question the order itself, by maintaining alive its contingent structure and its impossibility to give itself as a totality.

\[16\] Ibid.  
\[18\] Id., Topographie des Fremden, pp. 30-31.  
\[19\] Cf. Id., Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden, Chap. 1.4.  
\[21\] Ibid., p. 10.  
\[22\] Ibid., p. 20.
What follows from this consideration is that no order, as originally inhabited by the alien, may claim to actually possess itself and have access to its founding moment in terms of a surely acquired property, thanks to which it could consequently claim to exhibit itself out of a position of exclusive self-referentiality. Waldenfels has always been radically critical towards this form of unjustified total autarchy or – as Rada Ivekovic would put it – mere «autism»23 of the order. In his words, one should instead bear in mind that “every originary foundation shows itself as a retroactive foundation, or better: as a plurality of a posteriori foundations. […] Just like the birth of a singular individual, also the birth of a clan, people or culture has to be taken as an event which cannot be transformed into an own act. A past, which for me or for us has never been present, allows only to go back to it in the form of a determined reprise, which catches and prosecutes an originary prise, without exhausting it, and therefore is exposed to a constant surprise” 24.

It is exactly in this imminent surprise, i.e. in the constant possibility of its coming, that the own never ends dealing with the alien, that is, never ends facing the withdrawal by which it is inhabited since the beginning.

3. Responding: the Discourse of the Alien

Such a radical notion of alienness, as one may now easily deduce, brings high troubles within the traditional and established strategies of discourse. In fact, if the alien is to be conceived of as something manifesting itself only where it expropriates, destabilizes and exceeds the own, then a thorny question immediately arises: how to make the alien accessible without betraying it?

Indeed, any kind of intentional approach to it or attempt to thematize it would end up staging the alien, with the final result of depriving it of its constitutive “goad (Stachel)” 25. A dilemma arises here: either we speak about the alien and, therefore, inevitably transgress it – as we would make present that which is meant to be what it is only in its withdrawal from the own –, or we remain silent on it and, consequently, in order to adequately correspond to it, we do not approach it at all.

However, a philosophical attempt that stops at the stage of such an alternative between saying too much and saying nothing would be justified only if this would represent all it can be said about the phenomenon of the

alien and its (im)possible discourse. Yet, Waldenfels shows that this is not at all the case, as the possibility of another mode of discourse does exist and it can be traced as soon as we stop speaking (or remaining silent) about the alien and start instead speaking from the alien.

Nevertheless one may ask, at this point, where and whether such a speech from the alien makes itself possible. Waldenfels’ answer to this question is both simple and rich of implications. It is simple because he warns us that such a discourse implies neither the difficult effectuation of a nostalgic and rather nebulous “step behind”, à la Heidegger, nor the awaiting of a quite ungraspable speech-to-come in a messianic style. Rather, this speech – Waldenfels tells us – is already at work within experience, and it takes place whenever we start from the same request, provocation, appeal, pretension (Anspruch) through which the alien announces itself, by obliging us to respond to it. Therefore, if we look for a discourse in which the alien is not deprived of its constitutive character, we can only find it – so Waldenfels proposes – in the “register of response”. Responding, in fact, on one side, has the capability of not robbing the alien of its goad, as the response itself starts not from a subjective or thematizing act by the own self, but always in delay and as a pathic experience, that is, exactly from the same request of the alien, to which the answer is called to reply. On the other side, however, response can be interpreted as originarily indispensible and this in the Derridian sense of an original supplementary structure, since response is the only place where the request of the alien can come into appearance at all. Indeed, out of the trace left in the provoked answer, the alien would result as inaccessible. In this sense, Waldenfels writes: “Only in responding to that which we are hit from, appears that which hits as such”.  

It is exactly this double – simultaneously delayed and originary – character of response that explains the reason why Waldenfels maintains, on the one hand, that the alien, by manifesting itself in its withdrawal, has no space of appearance other than the answer that it provokes (alien cannot manifest itself other than in the “that to which (Worauf) the answer” relates); and, on the other hand, that the alien, by exactly commencing

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26 This one is exactly the title of one of the most important books by Waldenfels: Antwortregister, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1994.
27 Waldenfels himself, in different places of his work, describes the way in which the structure of the original supplementary temporality intervenes in the articulation of response. Cf. for example Id., Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden, Chap. 3.3.
28 Id., Bruchlinien der Erfahrung, p. 59.
through the same provocation it enacts, can never be completely exhausted by the delayed answer.

This is therefore the overall frame proposed by Waldenfels: the only way of relating to the alien, accomplishing to avoid its reduction, is the response imposed by the same request/call coming from the alien itself. This is the real event of responsivity (Responsivität).

Once this basic articulation of response is grasped, it is quite easy to follow Waldenfels in the description of the further implications, which every answering brings with it. In particular, four aspects must be mentioned here.  

First of all, response is inevitably limited because, by always coming too late in relation to the request which provokes it, it can never fully grasp and exhaust the alien to whom it has to answer: “The alien becomes what it is in no other place than the event of responding; this means that it never allows to be completely and univocally defined. That which we answer to always surmounts that which we give in/as the answer”.  

In this sense, the confrontation with the alien, far from accomplishing itself in terms of a final response, is constantly open to further and future possibilities of answer.

Secondly, response is unavoidable because it can never anticipate and therefore avoid the same provocation which puts it into scene. This brings us to the very important implication that also a refusal to answer is already a form of answering to the alien. Such a consideration is by no means a secondary detail, once we start thinking that the “silence” towards the alien’s requests can certainly become a political strategy full of consequences.

Thirdly, response is structurally asymmetrical since the relationship between the own and the alien does not ever take place before the act of answering itself, i.e. it does not take place in the domain of a third, neutral, transcultural or universal terrain, where own and alien would be symmetrical, comparable, measurable and even interchangeable. Instead, the relationship of the own with the alien, by taking place solely within the response’s domain and, consequently, always in delay, implies that the own itself can never become symmetrical with the alien. This consideration has important implications since it warns us that any presumed third and neutral place – in which own and alien were to be made equal – not only does not exist at all, but, whenever it is affirmed, is nothing less than a camouflage

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32 Id., Topographie des Fremden, p. 52.

strategy through which the own or – as Judith Butler would put it – the “parochial property of dominant culture” more or less consciously, pretends to impose its home-made perspective as the universal one. Precisely at this stage, all Eurocentric or globalizing discourses display their very concrete – and by no means universal – point of departure and, therefore, also the possibility of a genealogical unmasking of their untenable “totalizing” pretensions.

Lastly, response always possesses a creative trait. In fact, every answer, by starting from a non-anticipatable and hence unpredictable request of the alien, is inevitably constituted by a certain amount of unpreparedness and consequently by an at least minimal amount of inventiveness. Such an inventive character, which derives from the delayedness and limitedness of every answer, can be therefore understood as a necessarily contingent trait of any responsive act. In other words, by being structurally contingent, no answer can ever pretend to be the final or the best answer, but, at most, a possibly renewable response, a response which can be changed and transformed according to the occasional and historical events of request, appeal, demand of the alien. To use Waldenfels’ terminology, since no response has the access to a “first word”, no response has the possibility to become a “last word” either; since no response is the master of its own beginning, no response can be the master of its own end either. Answering, in this respect – and with this we may conclude –, can be considered as the very constitutive articulation of a constantly open and never accomplishable human discourse taking place among us. As Blanchot would call it: an entretien infini.

36 Fruitful reflections on this topic may be found in Id., Topographie des Fremden, pp. 48-50; Id., Anderswo statt Überall, in Id., Idiome des Denkens, pp. 331-341; Id., Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden, pp. 121-124.
37 This aspect of response shows clearly how Waldenfels assumes and originally develops one of the most important philosophical motives of his French master Maurice Merleau-Ponty, i.e. the concept of “creative expression”. A closer description of this appropriation may be found in B. Waldenfels, Das Paradox des Ausdrucks, in Id., Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge, pp. 105-123.
38 Cf. Id., Bruchlinien der Erfahrung, p. 125.