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<td>Author(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>臨床哲学. 17 P.3-P.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>2016-03-31</td>
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<td>Text Version</td>
<td>publisher</td>
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<td>URL</td>
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Osaka University
On the Conditions of the Ethical Becoming of the Self: Sensibility, Enjoyment and Displaced Subjectivity

Irina Poleshchuk

Abstract: At the center of this paper is an analysis of sensible subjectivity, as it is formed and deepened in enjoyment, and before it enters into an ethical intersubjective relation with the other person. I address the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to reveal the essential components of sensibility given in the forms of hunger, vision and light. I believe that the sensibility disclosed in enjoyment, in the joy of life, serves as a prototype which opens subjectivity up to the address of the other and allows the subject to enter into the ethical face-to-face relation with the other person. Analyzing the reverse structure of enjoyment, and contact with the sensible, I argue that pre-reflective affective sensibility is able to approach a relation with transcendence. This leads to a discussion of the inevitability of the ethical becoming of the self. From hunger and the satisfaction of needs the self moves to a joy of taste: tasting bread, and the taste of the materiality of life, but also bathing in the materiality of objects through vision and light. I will demonstrate that this pre-reflective primal sensibility has certain ethical gestures already rooted in its structure. Following Levinas’ line of discussion, I will show that ethical becoming is formed in sharing a ‘taste of bread’ but also in being displaced from the locus formed by enjoyment. To develop an analysis of sensibility, the sensible, enjoyment, subjectivity and affectivity in an extensive manner I will also address the works of Michel Henry, Hans Jonas and Edmund Husserl.

Key words: sensibility, ethics, subjectivity, Levinas, enjoyment, hunger, vision, light.
Introduction.

The theme of the intersubjective ethical relation with the other has been dominating phenomenological thought for many decades: many thinkers offer a patient and detailed analysis of the ethical encounter, the notion of ethical subjectivity, and the configurations of the self in the ethical relation with another human being. Levinas, famous as a philosopher of the face-to-face relation with the other, goes back to elaborate on the phenomenological life of sensuous subjectivity before it enters into the ethical relation with another human being. His novelty consists in the discovery that the origin of the responsible self lies in the enjoyment of life, in sensibility and in elemental dwelling in the world. Before providing a description of the face of the other appealing subjectivity, Levinas gives a constitutional analysis of the origin of a pre-reflective subjectivity in a modality of separation. His phenomenological account of the ethical relation traces back to a conceptual description of subjectivity conceived in the self-sensing of sensibility, in being involved in the world, but also being vulnerable in suffering and in an inability to detach from oneself. I believe that the self-sensing subjectivity disclosed in forms of enjoyment, hunger, vision and light constitutes an ethical modality of being exposed towards the other, where the meaning of responsibility for the other starts to grow. I would go further and state that Levinas reveals the origin of ethical subjectivity in a sensuous reflectivity, and in a sensibility satisfied with sensing sensations, but also in a displaced self, which will ground the conditions for the ethical becoming for the other. Thus, the goal of this paper is to radicalize the question of ethical subjectivity before it is engaged in the intersubjective relation with the other, to deepen the phenomenological description of sensuous subjectivity and to disclose the modalities of sensibility that influence ethical becoming.

My primary concern is to elaborate on pre-reflective ethical subjectivity as it is presented in Levinas’ philosophy. However, I believe that some of the characteristics of Levinasian sensibility can be found in Husserl’s notion of sensibility. Husserl gives a phenomenological explication of sensibility in the context
of his “analyses of passive synthesis” (Husserl, 2001). Husserl recovers the meaning of sensibility in both the active and passive senses. Sensibility in terms of passivity and activity is traced back to the Kantian idea of lower-order, non-cognitive mental acts as passive, and high-order acts of judgment and comprehension as active. Husserl indeed acknowledges Kant’s structure. However, for Kant the “threefold synthesis” that founds knowledge is definitely active in character. Husserl introduces sensibility as a passive synthesis: “Yet, the problem of the inner, purely immanent objectivity of the constitution, so to speak, of the inner world (Innenwelt) lies deeper and is essentially prior: precisely the problem of the constitution of the stream of lived experience of the subject as being for itself, as the field of all being properly and authentically belonging to it (des Subjekts als für es selbst seienend, als Feld alles ihm selbsteigen zugehörigen Seins)” (Husserl, 1973, 126).

In Ideas II Husserl employs the term intellectus agens to distinguish the inner layers of the personality where the two foundational forms of primal sensibility are located: the soul-dimension (seelische), as the ‘underground of spirit’, and the level of spirit, as the free acts of the intellect. These layers describe the complexity of sensuous subjectivity as well as its multi-layered origins. The sensuous life of subjectivity is a constant flow involving active and passive achievements (for instance, creating meanings). This constitutes the uniqueness of the ego and of its world. Subjectivity is described as sensibility, which might be called soul or ground, since, as Husserl explains, it is “in a certain sense a root soil… in darkest deeps” (Husserl, 1952, 279).

In the Husserlian sense, sensibility is connected to intentionality, or, to put it another way, intentionality directs itself actively towards sensibility. Sensibility is presupposed and pre-given. In Ideas II, Husserl notes that the pre-given object includes the range of associations, senses, drives, and instincts that define our attitude to the object, and which allow the subject to form judgments, and make decisions or distinctions. This function of sensibility is called the “natural side of spirit” (Husserl, 1952, 279) and it is characterized as an active one.

Addressing such fundamental works as Totality and Infinity, Existence
and Existents, and Otherwise than Being or beyond the Essence, it is clear that Levinas gleaned decisive insights for his own analysis of sensibility from Husserl. In this short overview of sensibility in Husserl's project I have mentioned two aspects of sensibility: active and passive. I would argue that the active layer of sensibility is present in Levinas' description of enjoyment, though in a different sense from what we find in Husserl, while the passive layer of sensibility is enabled in the intersubjective relation. What interests me is how the active and affective dimensions of sensibility reveal a pre-giveness of the ethical self. Thus, my first step will be to analyze enjoyment and its innovative structure as it transforms the meaning of intentionality and assigns a new meaning to the sensible.

Enjoyment

I will begin with Levinas' phenomenological account of enjoyment, and his use of Husserl's term primal sensibility, in his description of subjectivity. The purpose of enjoyment is to orient the subject in the world and ground the primary identity of the subject in comprehension, judgment and the satisfaction of needs.

In Existence and Existents, Levinas endeavours to describe the emergence of consciousness from the anonymity of *il y a* (Levinas, 1978, 55). This is an event whereby something as yet unidentifiable acquires separate existence and stops the anonymous flow of being. Consciousness, along with subjectivity and its identity, are emergent from *il y a* rather than pre-existing in it (Levinas, 1978, 52). Consciousness has its origin, as Levinas names it, in its lack of correspondence with being. In a very paradoxical way, being, then, is understood as a continuous insomnia; falling asleep is the first act of consciousness (Levinas, 1996, 132) and this is the first event in the birth of awareness, which is gradually engaging the world through enjoyment. Enjoyment constitutes the essential life activity of subjectivity: sleeping, eating, watching, touching and working (Levinas, 2004, 111). Certainly this is a concern for oneself and it covers all other (ethical) activities; the mode of subjectivity's life is a consumption of everything that surrounds it. Objects of the world are interiorised...
and integrated into knowledge. However, thanks to an exterior object, the ego can identify and describe itself in the world (Levinas, 2004, 113). All phenomena in this situation have only a utilitarian purpose: “every object offers itself to enjoyment, a universal category of the empirical” (Levinas, 2004, 132).

What is enjoyment (jouissance) then? Enjoyment and the feeling of joy do not have any particular task. They exist for themselves. At this level, and before entering the face-to-face relation with the other, life has value for subjectivity, since enjoyment provides the ego with the possibility of living for the sake of life as such (Levinas, 2004, 115).

“The I is thus at home with itself. Through the home our relation with space as distance and extension is substituted for the simple “bathing in the elemental.” But the adequate relation with the element is precisely bathing. The interiority of immersion is not convertible into exteriority. … To bathe in the element is to be in an inside-out world.” (Levinas, 2004, 132)

This “bathing in the elemental” of life itself is also an affective experience of being at home (“chez soi”) in which dwelling manifests itself as an enjoyment of the materiality of the world and the mastering of it. This affective experience of subjectivity initiates subjectivity into a sensual embodied event that is grasped in a feeling of joy. Subjectivity relates itself to the objects of enjoyment; it is sensibility that forms the exterior and interior of the self. Here, it is important to see enjoyment as a new form intentionality. Because the sensual embodiment of subjectivity is conceived as “bathing in the elemental”, enjoyment (as bathing) does not have any particular aim, and the nature of enjoyment contains a kind of reversed intentionality. Intention is sustained by that at which it aims. In other words, enjoyment (joy of bathing) is animated by what is enjoyed, by the sensible itself and not vice versa: “(t)he intentionality aiming at the exterior changes direction in the course of its very aim by becoming interior to the exteriority it constitutes, somehow comes from the point to which it goes, recognizing itself past
in its future, lives from what it thinks” (Levinas, 2004, 129).

The attitude to life as experiencing enjoyment is motivated by the principles of life itself. The experience of enjoyment is a momentary recovery of life’s forces, which is very natural for a human being, as Levinas writes, “in enjoyment I am absolutely for my self” (Levinas, 2004, 134). However, the sensible self here has a different meaning. Enjoyment described as “bathing in the elemental” is a pure sensibility (using Husserl’s term primal sensibility), which does not originate from the position of the I. The ego is challenged or, in other words, is melted in enjoyment without intending any purpose. In his analysis of enjoyment and the affective state of sensibility Levinas focuses a great deal of attention on the “contraction” of the sentiment which subjectivity is experiencing. Levinas writes: “(w)hat is termed an affective state does not have the dull monotony of a state, but is a vibrant exaltation in which dawns the self. For the I is not the support of Enjoyment. The ‘intentional’ structure is here wholly different; the I is the very contraction of sentiment, the pole of a spiral whose coiling and involution is drawn by Enjoyment” (Levinas, 2004, 118). An important claim here is that the I does not generate enjoyment and therefore is not taken as a source of enjoyment. Rather, in this surprising description of the essence of enjoyment, subjectivity does not have any chance to return to the sameness of the self in its consumption and the satisfaction of its need. The being of subjectivity is constructed not only on the experience of enjoyment, or the enjoyment of enjoyment, but the I also builds its existence on enjoyment (Levinas, 2004, 134-135). Building existence on enjoyment means that the subject originates from the affective experience of life. As John Drabinski articulates the role of affection: “The I is supported by affectivity and thus cannot be said to contain affection” (Drabinski, 2001, 113).

To conclude and summarize the discussion thus far: Subjectivity emerges in the independence of self-sensing while enjoying elemental sensations. Bathing in the materiality of the world, embodied subjectivity arises from the self-sensing of sensibility, which is gradually and in a fragile way formed in enjoyment. Levinas states that “to enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to
anything else, in pure expenditure – this is the human” (Levinas, 2004, 133). Levinas brings the sensation of enjoyment back to life itself and removes it from the realm of idealism. Subjectivity receives its meaning from sensibility and not vice versa. Thus, the human, and the birth of sensing subjectivity, is hidden in enjoyment and not in the light of cognitive life. What are the components of sensible subjectivity which make it open to ethical becoming as one-for-the-other? To give a comprehensive answer I will now move to a description of sensibility as it is comprised of hunger, vision and light.

Hunger, Vision, Light

The discussion of sensible subjectivity is connected to a function of auto-affectivity revealed in the living present, which is an inherent component of the self. The experience of the self depends on a variety of these sensuous elements, constituting various auto-affective experiences, and among them Levinas distinguishes hunger, vision and light. Levinas explicitly writes that “subjectivity is not the Ego but me” (Levinas, 1987, 150) and, as an interpretation of this sentence, I would suggest that hunger, vision and light together reveal the sensing self, my self, but also the self as openness to the transcendence of the other human being.

The first element of the being of the sensible, which in the face-to-face relation becomes an essential force of ethical responsibility, is, as Levinas puts it, ‘being hungry’. The whole project of ethics starts here from the living subjectivity, i.e. from the embodied hungry sensibility: “Only a subject that eats can be for-the-other” (Levinas, 2006, 74). In its hunger, and constant search for the means of feeding itself, subjectivity is for the first time disclosed as vulnerable. This vulnerability is different in its nature from the vulnerability provoked by the appeal of the other. Together with hunger comes pain that, to some extent, forces subjectivity to remain in the modality of for-itself. At the same time, the satisfaction of needs, the ability to enjoy food, and also a memory of the pain caused by hunger, all indicate fundamental levels of vulnerability where the self is exposed to the exterior.
In his discussion of hunger, Levinas provides an impressive description of the inner and outer life of auto-affective subjectivity: “It is an existence for itself—but not, initially, in view of its own existence. Nor is it a representation of self by self. It is for itself as in the expression ‘each for himself; for itself as the ‘famished stomach that has no ears’, capable of killing for a crust of bread, is for itself; for itself as the surfeited one who does not understand the starving and approaches him as an alien species, as the philanthropist approaches the destitute” (Levinas, 2004, 118). Hunger is a form of being-for-itself. It is being sensible for needs, which the world as given for-me is able to satisfy. Levinas describes hunger as the ‘stomach that has no ears’. Hunger is not necessarily based on a total denial of the demand of the other human being. However, the sensation of hunger, being strong and causing pain, blocks sensible subjectivity from the other. Here, hunger is recognized to be a first identification of me as for-myself. I am not able to hear the other because I am present for my self in feeding myself and I am co-present with the world given for me as the satisfaction of my needs. The sensation of hunger is truly mine, even though the sensation may not be fully recognized by me. It sketches and sharpens my existence and my precisely localized body, where I sense myself inside. Here, the deafness appears to be repercussive because in being hungry I am locked inside myself and it is not just a deliberate deafness and inability to hear the other.

The desire to satisfy hunger becomes my intention and is rationally appropriated as mine. I am making a choice under its guidance. The need to satisfy is not just a subpersonal level of me, but is myself: the hunger is the inside of my embodiment, where getting ‘food’, choosing what I eat, is an identification of what is me and my own inner sensibility. In Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence Levinas writes: “The taste is the way a sensible subject becomes a volume, or the irreducible event in which the special phenomenon of biting becomes the identification called me, in which it becomes me through the life that lives from its very life in a frueri vivendi” (Levinas, 2006, 73). Subjectivity creates its own volume or, in other words, a sense of the self, from the taste of what it enjoys. It is important to accentuate here that in his description of hunger Levinas prioritizes
an embodied subjectivity as the very first grounded step in approaching any ethical relation.

While I have described hunger as the sensibility of my inner self, vision and sight designate my outer self. Vision is one of the most dominating senses that we have. I am involved in the world as something that appears to me and it appears because I see it. Levinas notices that subjectivity initially engages in the world as it is given for its needs and wishes. Before being engaged in the face-to-face relation with the other, subjectivity first discovers itself in the privileged position of a visual relationship with the world. At this point of the discussion we might connect vision to thinking and the forms of apprehension that enable subjectivity to identify itself. However, I will also be discussing other aspects of our visual relations with the world.

Being embodied in the world, subjectivity makes a distinction between what is the inner and outer of the self: “The I in the world has an inside and an outside” (Levinas, 1978, 39). The thought is followed and provoked by vision. In “The Nobility of Sight”, Hans Jonas explicates how vision and thought are interrelated in ethics. There are several characteristics that distinguish vision from the other senses. As Jonas notes, “sight is par excellence the sense of the simultaneous.... An opening of the eyes, discloses a world of co-present qualities spread out in space, ranged in depth, continuing into indefinite distance” (Jonas, 2001, 136). Vision has spatial and temporal dimensions that locate subjectivity in the world. The world is co-present, together with me and for me. “Only the simultaneous representation of the visual field gives us coexistence as such, i.e., the copresence of things in one being which embraces them all as their common present” (Jonas, 2001, 144). Vision becomes a means of subjectivity’s temporalizing of itself in the present, as subjectivity finds itself in being for-itself at the moment of the now.

In fact, Levinas thinks a great deal about the spacious dimension of vision. I always originally find myself at a distance from objects in the world: “Our presence in the world is across a distance...we are separated from objects by a distance,
which can indeed be traversed, but remains a distance” (Levinas, 1978, 39). Distance provides a picture of the world as ready for-me. I must not be involved in the arrangement of the scene, or present within the visible, if I am to see it. However, to orient myself I do perform acts of staring, gazing, and examining things in detail. For Levinas, apprehension is rooted here, and there is an active work of thought within apprehension that forms the inner self of subjectivity, and its locus.

The visual engagement with the world found in focusing and examining implies an experience of choosing. Here, we see a specific form of freedom. I am free to choose what to focus on, and this focusing accents my outer self, and then filters it into an apprehended thought: “In existing, an object exists for someone, is destined for someone, already leans toward an inwardness and, without being absorbed in it, gives itself” (Levinas, 1978, 40).

Even though Levinas's final goal is to show the dislocation and disruption of sensibility under the appeal of the other being, the role and description of vision in setting forward sensibility seems to be very close to Merleau-Ponty's concept of vision. Merleau-Ponty argues that vision, or the process of looking at, implies a variety of viewpoints. We are not just focusing but, since we do not see an object all at once, we try to gather an image of it as a whole. In some cases our body, subliminally, is moving from one viewpoint to another to have a more precise image and to gather multiple perspectives from which to form a meaning or a feeling: “every experience of the visible has always been given to me within the context of the movements of the look” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 134). The important point here is a movement performed by the body: it is a formation of the visual field and physical accessibility. To go back to Levinas' idea of vision, I suggest that distance and focus centralize body movement as being co-present with the object I see, but they also provide a spatial orientation as topologically my space and my locus.

Hans Jonas adds that the connection of vision and thinking happens at the level of focusing: focusing and/or choosing something in the visual field is intentional in its nature. Everything that is under my focusing gaze is subjected to thought. The freedom of choosing something excludes the invisible. In the act of
focusing, I choose the visible and ignore the invisible or, to use Levinas' terminology, I ignore absolute otherness. I would call this effect lensing, where subjectivity's vision may be compared to the work of gravitational lensing in its distortion of perspective, which can make one part of the visual field appear close and another part invisible, i.e. it may also remove alterity from the visual field or horizon. I am always tuning and adjusting what I can see. However, the experience of vision also has another interesting dimension: in seeing I might not yet be fully engaged by the object I am looking at. Jonas writes: “I may choose to enter into intercourse with it, but it can appear without the fact of its appearance already involving intercourse. By my seeing it, no issue of my possible relations with it is prejudged. Neither I nor the object has so far done anything to determine the mutual situation. It lets me be as I let it be” (Jonas, 2001, 145). This ‘letting be’ distinguishes vision from touch. By touching we are entering into contact with the object. Thus, the spatial and ethical situation is immediately changing, while the ‘letting be’ in merely watching preserves a separation, without entering into the sphere of the object examined. In ‘letting be’ sensible subjectivity just unfolds itself while also opening itself towards the otherness of the other. One might see vision as a specific form of sensibility, initiating proximity with the other and contemplation.

In Levinas’ reading of subjectivity, vision is accompanied by light. The materiality of the world is illuminated and receives its existence only in the light of my bonne conscience, or in the light of me being in the moment of the present: “Things have a form, are seen in the light—silhouettes or profiles.... As silhouette and profile a thing owes its nature to a perspective, remains relative to a point of view; a thing's situation thus constitutes its being” (Levinas, 2004, 140). The Levinasian concept of light is not easy to understand: it clarifies a structural component of sensibility before the event of the face-to-face encounter but, as I interpret it, it also has a strong ethical emphasis. He seems to acknowledge a bi-directionality of light: “Light makes possible... this enveloping of the exterior by the inward, which is the very structure of the cogito and of sense. Thought is always clarity or the dawning of a light. The miracle of light is the essence of thought: due
to the light an object, while coming from without, is already ours in the horizon which precedes it; it comes from an exterior already apprehended and comes into being as though it came from us, as though commanded by our freedom” (Levinas, 1978, 48). Here light enables things to be present as for-me and to be apprehended. Light envelops the inwardness of subjectivity, illuminates things and saturates them within the present moment, but also in the process of illuminating the light absents itself.

Levinas makes an enigmatic remark that light “comes from an exterior already apprehended”, which makes it seems as if it comes from the apprehended world back to the subject but is, at the same time, inside the subject, inhering within the subject as if it arose from within. One of the important characteristics of light is its immediacy. Levinas accentuates its closeness, in which no distance is present, and it is here that I find the ethical meaning of light. In the article “Language and Proximity” Levinas gives an impressive description of how vision and light work together on the level of sensibility. “Sight is, to be sure, an openness and a consciousness, and all sensibility, opening as a consciousness, is called vision; but even in its subordination to cognition sight [still] maintains contact and proximity. The visible caresses the eye. One sees and hears like one touches (Levinas, 1987, 118).” Light manifests as a generosity that annihilates the distance established by vision; it creates a certain kind of visual enjoyment where the visual images caress the eye and this seeing experience enabled by light is not cognitive. It is a sensitive bathing, which might be compared to the touch, the touching of the untouchable without reducing it to a pure cognition. Seeing with light becomes visual welcoming, proximity and embrace rather than objective knowing. This is a sensibility that is opened towards alterity.

The incarnation of vision in sensibility is needed in order to indicate the spacious orientation of being present, to get a grip on time, and to construct topologically what is called my place and my viewpoint. Levinas’ strong emphasis, which makes his concept of vision so different from other interpretations, is that in the case of enjoyment, vision, as a particular form of sensibility, does not
originate from the subject; rather, the subject is saturated in vision. The work of light illuminates sensibility not only as localized subjectivity, but orients it towards alterity, enlightening the inner and the outer of the self, as well as the exterior of subjectivity. Although Levinas does not fully enter into a discussion of the conceptual work of light I believe that light plays a significant role in approaching the question of the ethical becoming of the self. While hunger and vision are focused on self-presence, where subjectivity holds on to the present and masters its comfort zone, light is an enveloping otherness for subjectivity, and gradually displaces it from its comfort of dwelling. Hunger, taste, vision and light shape the body, the skin, and the flesh, which, in their turn, constitute subjectivity’s experience of the enjoyment of dwelling. Without this materialization of one’s life, without the material volume of the self, and without these possibilities of loosening its material locus, the dwelling and enjoyment of subjectivity as sensibility would not be fully opened to enter the face-to-face relation with the other human being.

**Affectivity and Sensibility**

As I have shown before, from the very start subjectivity delineates its existence as a sensibility of self-affection born by the relation with life itself. This sensual bathing in the world is its pre-reflective modus: the embodied subject, immersed in life and in “living from”, enjoys the world, which, in its turn, envelops and saturates subjectivity.

In *Material Phenomenology*, Henry describes pre-reflective self-awareness as grounded in auto-affection (Henry, 2008). Similar to Levinas, Henry states that in being self-affected through the various experiences of its sensual life subjectivity manifests itself as sensibility. The auto-affection of subjectivity unfolds a purely immanent feeling that subjectivity has of the concrete modes of its life: hunger, thirst and pain are revealed through their passive giveness. The constitution of intentional object is absent in our experiences of hunger, pain, and dwelling. They are present as purely immanent experiences of life, as a self-manifestation or as a
self-appearance. Levinas reads this immanent experience of life as enjoyment or as a “living from” that constitutes the vivacity of a subjectivity primarily rooted in sensing itself.⁶

The conceptual background for reading auto-affection as localizing and punctuating a sensible embodied subjectivity can also be found in Henry’s interpretation of auto-affection. Giving phenomenological analyses of the moving and sensing body Henry distinguishes two senses of auto-affection - the strong sense and the weak sense. In the strong sense, auto-affection admits the power of life itself and is actively involved in it, or, in other words, it is affected. Indeed, life itself affects subjectivity but subjectivity is also affecting the way it experiences life. It is nothing else but an active self-affection. In the weak sense, auto-affection is formed as passivity, where the subject is given to itself. Bathing and participating in life are both active and passive involvements. In other words, active auto-affection is reversed into passivity because the active state of auto-affection is so radical and so powerful that it turns into passive auto-affection.⁷

Both Levinas and Henry point out that in its integrity auto-affection discloses an interiority of the subject. Subjectivity is born only in the self-affecting state and in being passive. This pre-reflective sensibility initiated in auto-affection provides a path towards the description of dwelling and enjoying, as well as an interiorized and localized subjectivity, which is a beginning for itself but is also an origin for any ethical gesture. Levinas writes: “What begins to be does not exist before having begun, and yet it is what does not exist that must through its beginning give birth to itself, come to itself, without coming from anywhere. Such is the paradoxical character of beginning which is constitutive of an instant. And this should be emphasized. A beginning does not start out of the instant that precedes the beginning; its point of departure is contained in its point of arrival, like a rebound movement” (Levinas, 1978, 45). This self-affecting subjectivity is not a pure conjunction of the self with itself, nor is it a detour to itself. Rather, in self-affectivity there is a gap or a disparity in the self. The claim is that the function of auto-affection is to give birth to the ego as a locus in the self. Therefore, I read the
conceptual work of auto-affection as a prioritizing of the existent over existence, and the locating of a sensible embodied subjectivity, which is, first of all, sensitive to the activities of the world (Murawska, 2012).

In dwelling and in “living from”, and at the same time enjoying and bathing in the world, self-affecting subjectivity is already determined as being here and as a body, which unfolds itself in the present. There is a particular temporal modality of subjectivity designated as the being here of the body, which sketches its static character: in space the subject locates itself as a center and as a privileged locus, which is at the same time a localized body grasped in experiences of being at home (chez soi). Therefore, the self-affecting subject is a pure present, a temporal punctum and a center in terms of space and time. I would go further and state that by holding its locus, the self-affecting subject is tending towards a temporal synchronization that comforts its interiorized dwelling in the world. Here I emphasize that auto-affection also reveals the continuity of the self's inner-time, a protentive and retentive temporalization of its being-in-the-world. The natural need of self-affecting subjectivity is to be able to return to the self which also means to come back to the core of the self and to preserve it as an identity. To exit its ecstatic existence self-affecting subjectivity needs a refuge, a possibility of withdrawal, or a retreat into the locus.

These enactive perceptual presents, grasped in the forms of hunger, vision, and light, disclose embodied subjectivity at the level of ‘the lived body’, but they also assemble the bodily factors that govern conscious life prenoetically, i.e. before or not fully accessible to conscious awareness. This pre-reflective experience of the lived body, involving the complexity of bodily sensations and feelings of the world, features the arising of the subject of experience, but not primarily or necessarily its object and/or intentional content (Bower, Gallagher, 2015, 113, 117). Affective experience may not explicitly convey content, rather the sensible informs the affect itself. This brings us to the question of the ethical becoming of subjectivity, rooted, as I suggest, in Levinas’ understanding of sensibility.

Describing sensibility as hunger, vision, and light, Levinas intends to
establish a conceptual foundation for approaching a relation to transcendence. In the article “Doing Before Hearing: On the Primacy of Touch” Wyschogrod points out that in his radical rethinking of sensibility, Levinas’ primary goal is to separate the function of sensation from the cognitive force of representation (Wyschogrod, 1980, 182). This project involves two aspects of sensibility: the sensibility of enjoyment before the ethical encounter and the sensibility found in the face-to-face encounter. In both cases of sensibility, sense bestowal comes from outside and the structure of enjoyment reverses intentionality in such way that there is no noesis-noema correlation. This model of sensibility in enjoyment appears to be anterior to any construction of meaning and, according to Levinas, guarantees an access to transcendence. The transcendental character of sensibility is structurally determined by the moment of the contact with alterity. The profound nuance, which Levinas wants to point out, is that the contact itself should not be read as consciousness of contact but rather subjectivity is subordinated to that with which it is in contact. Thus, Levinas’ innovative reading of sensibility tends to see sensibility as alterity that facilitates our openness to exteriority. As Levinas puts it: “This situation is not reducible to a representation, not even an articulate representation. It is a question of the sensibility, which is the manner of Enjoyment. It is when one interprets sensibility as representation and mutilated thought that one is compelled to invoke the finitude of our thought in order to account for these ‘obscure’ thoughts. The sensibility we are describing starting with Enjoyment of the element does not belong to the order of thought but to that of sentiment, that is, the affectivity wherein the egoism of the I pulsates” (Levinas, 2004, 135). As Levinas shows, sensibility becomes an initial source of enjoyment that does not require a return to representation. The dimension of enjoyment always articulates something that is more, i.e. it always intends to go beyond and/or to approach transcendence in sensibility.

By accentuating the crucial role of sensibility in the ethical dimension, Levinas shows the subordination of consciousness to sensibility and to praxis. The affective level of sensibility, as even Husserl would agree, does not necessarily reveal the activity of intentional consciousness. The ambiguity of sensibility is
placed at the core of phenomenological experience and confirms the paradoxical character of the intuitive experiences taking place before any cognitive act. The innovation of Levinas’ analysis of sensibility is rooted in its openness to alterity. His goal is to maintain otherness within the structure of sensibility. However, this openness involves being vulnerable: sensible being is also simply dependent being, being vulnerable in its sensibility, because in openness towards the world and together with enjoyment, subjectivity also experiences pain and suffering, and hence it cares for its own protection in but also thought of the world.

This analysis of sensibility fundamentally problematizes subjectivity. Incarnated sensible subjectivity also possesses the possibility of signification in the sense of donation. The immediacy of enjoyment is not brought to the light of knowledge but is described as sharing bread with the other: “Sensibility can be a vulnerability, an exposedness to the other or a saying only because it is an enjoyment. The passivity of wounds, the “hemorrhage” of the mouthful of bread from the mouth that tastes in full enjoyment” (Levinas, 2006, 74). Sharing my bread with the other I also keep my piece of bread and thus I confirm my persistence in being in the world and I maintain my conatus. However, in this incomplete sharing the complacency of subjectivity and its modality of being as for-itself are questioned: giving something, which represents my imperfect happiness also turns into the denucleation of the self. In its corporeality, in its hunger, and in giving its bread to the other, subjectivity already becomes bound to the other. This is the rise of ethical signification, which gradually transforms subjectivity into the ethical self: “sharing of your bread with the famished,” a “welcoming of the wretched into your house” (Isaiah, 58). The immediacy of sensibility is the for-the-other of one’s own materiality” (Levinas, 2006, 74). Sharing in the enjoyment of the taste of bread is a first contact, which also shifts subjectivity from its locus, displaces it and denudes its conatus. As Levinas says “the proximity of the other is the immediate opening up for the other of the immediacy of enjoyment, of the immediacy of taste, materialization of matter, altered by the immediacy of contact” (Levinas, 2006, 74). The alterity rooted in sensibility is a prototype of another sensibility revealed in the relation
with the other human being. At this point of the discussion, enjoyment, experienced as something that is always more, presupposes sharing and giving, and it is here, following Levinas’ line of reflection, that sensibility approaches the transcendence revealed in the ethical gesture for the other. Thus, thanks to its reverse structure, enjoyment, in its full materiality, welcomes the other without reducing it to the structure of knowledge or consciousness.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to draw attention to an aspect of Levinas’ analysis of sensibility. Before the event of the face-to-face encounter with the other, subjectivity, in its sensibility, is explicitly given in terms of corporeal manifestations that orient it towards transcendence. Starting from enjoyment and bathing in the elemental of life, Levinas moves to an image of corporeality as an ethical body that is vulnerable and uncovered without dissimulation. Not only in being hungry, or tasting bread in full enjoyment, but also in vision and light, affective subjectivity is able to share its enjoyment of enjoyment with the other. Levinas reveals the ‘living present’ of subjectivity, which is a means to organize its own locus. However, the affective experience of light, the reverse structure of enjoyment, and the subordination to the sensible itself, unfold an alterity that is rooted within sensibility. This is the crucial point of Levinas’ understanding of sensibility: it is not an origin of knowledge, rather the sensible self arises from sensibility, or in other words, subjectivity in enjoyment is animated by what is enjoyed, be the sensible itself. Thus, the otherness inside sensible subjectivity opens up the self to the other in its ethical becoming for the other. This manifests in the sharing of enjoyment and the taste of materiality but also in giving and ‘letting be’. This praxis shifts subjectivity from its locus, initiated by enjoyment, even though its conatus is not questioned radically enough by the address of the other person, subjectivity is already displaced by the gesture of sharing with and for the other. These are the first steps of the ethical becoming of the self.
This analysis of sensibility is crucial for the whole ethical enterprise since it discloses subjectivity in its pre-reflective affective experience and demonstrates the richness of sensible life and the subject’s potentiality of being for the other. One of the goals of this paper was to show the presence of an open ethical horizon within sensibility, which later would serve as a foundation for the relation with the other person. I would go further and state that this affective sensibility pushes subjectivity to respond to the appeal of the other. Only hungry being, hungry for life, able to feel and taste, able to enjoy without any aim, to enjoy the enjoyment of sharing, can be for the other. It is here that the roots of the sensible self give birth to ethical becoming.

References


Husserl, Ed. manuscript L 120, 3b.


Levinas, Emmanuel. 2006. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond the Essence*. Translated by Lingis, A. Duquesne University Press.


Notes

1 For a more detailed explication see Husserl’ s manuscript L 120, 3b.

2 In Larousse’s dictionary “jouissance” is defined as - 1. *plaisir instense* (intensive pleasure). 2. *Libre usage, possession d’une chose* (possession of the thing).


4 in *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.254, Robert Sokolowski gives an elaborated explication of two levels in the formation of the self. What I want is a subpersonal stratum of the self, where the intention is not fully rationalized, but I am still aware of it. What I wish is my rationalized intention, which indicates the personal stratum. In the current discussion of sensible
subjectivity I suggest that hunger, eating and tasting are appropriated as mine, demonstrating the existence of a personal embodied stratum.

The world appears to be other but it is not the absolute alterity of the other person.

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas explains that “If the intentionality of ‘living from’ which is properly Enjoyment is not constituted, this is therefore not because an elusive, inconceivable content, inconvertible into a meaning of thought, irreducible to the present and consequently unrepresentable, would compromise the universality of representation and transcendent methods; it is the very movement of constitution that is reversed” (see Levinas, E. *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, 2004, p. 129). The enjoyment of ‘living from’ would seek to interrupt and question the transcendent method, which always tends to construct senses in representation. In enjoyment constitution is reversed because in self-affectivity the sense of enjoyment issues from and is constituted by what is enjoyed.

“L’Archi-intelligibilité appartient au movement interne de la Vie absolue qui s’engendre elle-même, n'étant rien d'autre que la façon selon laquelle ce processus d'auto-engendrement s'accomplit. La Vie s'engendre elle-même en venant de soi, dans la condition qui est la sienne et qui est celle de s'éprouver soi-même” in Henry, M. *Incarnation, Une philosophie de la chair*, Paris, Seuil, 2000, p.29.

In *Passive Syntheses*, pp. XXII, paragraph 35.

In *L’un-pour-l’autre*. Levinas et la signification Didier Franck discusses corporeal subjectivity structured as one-for-the-other in its enjoyment and its affective sensibility.

In *Otherwise than Being or beyond the Essence* Levinas uses the term ‘denucleation’ to explain that the self is removed from its nucleus, as it is denuded.