

Levinas and the Possibility of Phenomenological Realism¹⁾

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to offer a new answer to the question of whether Levinas can be considered a phenomenologist. Numerous studies have addressed the question of in what sense Levinas's philosophy can be considered phenomenological (cf. Lavigne 2000, etc.). Already in his earliest work, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, Levinas raises doubts regarding Husserlian phenomenology, and Husserl himself offered critical remarks on Levinas's interpretation²⁾. Nevertheless, what is of greater importance for this issue is how we are to interpret the fact that, despite Levinas's claim in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* that he "fully relies on the phenomenological method" (TI, 28), the work as a whole unfolds a sustained critique of both Husserl and Heidegger (cf. TI, 25; 90; 95; 122; 126f. etc.).

Levinas's unique understanding of phenomenology has been interpreted as a turn or extension of phenomenology, or more precisely, as a non-constitutional phenomenology³⁾. While there are perspectives that defend a "Levinasian phenomenology" as still being a form of phenomenology despite its critical transcendence of Husserlian phenomenology, there are also scholars, such as Jocelyn Benoist, who acknowledge that Levinas introduced new themes into the phenomenological tradition, but they argue that Levinas should ultimately be evaluated as having transcended the framework of phenomenology and developed an independent philosophy.

While acknowledging Benoist's argument to some extent, this paper contends that Levinas should still be considered a phenomenologist, albeit in a different sense from previous interpretations. On the one hand, this study agrees with Benoist in maintaining that Levinas's descriptions belong outside the order of Husserlian phenomenology and that one should not hastily demand a transformation or expansion of phenomenology. Phenomenology is indeed a dynamic movement, characterized by various modifications, but Levinas departs from its fundamental principles by rejecting both constitution and transcendental idealism. Forcing the framework of phenomenology to expand so as to incorporate Levinas's thought would not only fail to properly assess his critique of phenomenology but would also risk undermining the very integrity of phenomenology itself.

On the other hand, this paper diverges from Benoist's position in arguing that Levinas remains, in a certain sense, phenomenological. This is because what Levinas primarily critiques is the idealistic aspect of Husserl's philosophy, whereas his descriptions in *Totality and Infinity* are more compatible with the realist tendencies found in Husserl's earlier texts (pre-*Ideas I*). In this regard, by referring to texts from the Munich-Göttingen circles, particularly those of R. Ingarden, who exhibits stronger realist inclinations than Husserl, this paper aims to demonstrate that the theory of enjoyment in the second part of *Totality and Infinity* can be regarded as a form of phenomenological realism.

Through this analysis, the goal is to justify Levinas's own assertion that he is a phenomenologist — without simply transforming or expanding phenomenology — by appropriately evaluating his critique of Husserlian phenomenology while maintaining a phenomenological framework.

1. The “turn” interpretation

Totality and Infinity contains two seemingly contradictory claims: on the one hand, Levinas expresses his commitment to phenomenology in the preface. On the other hand, he develops an anti-phenomenological argument throughout the book. Prior studies have interpreted Levinas's phenomenology as a turn or extension of phenomenology. Against this "turn" interpretation, Benoist argues that “*Totality and Infinity* — even though it is a book that adopts the phenomenological method, [...] — the substance of what the philosopher has to say is not of the phenomenological order, essentially goes beyond this idea” (Benoist 2015: 45). In particular, Benoist points out that Levinas's descriptions are outside the realm of the constitution of intentionality, by focusing on (1) the analysis of the Other which speaks in the name of metaphysics and the infinity, and (2) that of sensibility to the sonority of sound (cf. Benoist, 2011; 2015). Therefore, *Totality and Infinity* should not be read simply as an ethical phenomenology or a turned phenomenology (cf. Benoist=Cohen-Levinas, 2013: 188-191).

Benoist's argument that Levinas's analysis is outside the bounds of Husserlian phenomenology is reasonable and persuasive. Indeed Husserl says that:

“[...] phenomenology is *eo ipso* “transcendental idealism”. [...] Only someone who misunderstands either the deepest sense of intentional method, or that of transcendental reduction, or perhaps both, can attempt to separate phenomenology from transcendental idealism. (Hua I, 118f.)

Therefore, Levinas departs from the fundamental idea of phenomenology by rejecting the connection between intentionality and transcendental idealism. To forcibly extend the framework of phenomenology would not only fail to appreciate the motivation for Levinas's critique of Husserl, but would also endanger the independence of phenomenology.

2. The argument of realistic phenomenology

While accepting Benoist's critique, this paper will try to affirm that Levinas is, in a sense, a phenomenologist. This is because Levinas criticizes Husserl's idealistic features, and the realistic ideas of Husserl before *Ideen I* and the Munich-Göttingen circles are compatible with the descriptions in *Totality and Infinity*. This paper will summarize the similarities between Levinas and Ingarden, and point out that *Totality and Infinity* can be regarded as a kind of phenomenological realism. In doing so, it would be possible to justify both Levinas's criticism of Husserl and his statement that he employs phenomenological methods.

One of the points of controversy between Ingarden and Husserl was whether or not the underlying layer of reality belonged to consciousness (Smith 1997; Uemura 2015;2019).

We could once again take up this controversial issue by asking whether the real world and the entities present in it are purely intentional objects or something fundamentally different from these. (Ingarden, 2016: 171)

Whereas Husserl considered sense-data (*Empfindungsdaten*) as really inherent components (reelle Bestandstücke) of consciousness, Ingarden argues that sense-data are external to consciousness by focusing on our powerlessness in perceptual experience and the causal binding of the body (cf. Ingarden, 2016: 171–174). The idea of causal binding of the body means not merely that we are not completely free in our perception, but that changes in the objects of perception are possible only by our moving our bodies and changing the causal circumstances of the physical world (e.g., The sun's glare causes the body to turn around to read).

Husserl's transcendental idealism asserts that The world and the beings in the world are by their very nature intentional correlators, and the independence of their existence is denied. Furthermore, it holds that in the intentional correlation, the object of intentionality does not necessarily have to actually exist. In contrast, Ingarden's realist phenomenology demonstrates that world and the beings within it are not exclusively purely intentional objects, but there is something fundamentally different from them. According to this view, the sensory aspect of perceptual experience does not belong to consciousness, but as such has some connection to the world (cf. Uemura 2015). What is crucial is whether Levinas can also be considered a realistic phenomenologist in this sense.

3. Levinas's interpretation of the horizon

Levinas interprets "the horizon" in an anti-idealistic way on the same page as the aforementioned Preface.

Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with meaning — such is the essential teaching of Husserl. What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects! What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives. (TI, 28)

His interpretation is contrary to Husserl's intention, but Levinas is aware of this and states that it is an essential teaching of Husserl. In the same passage, Levinas notes his own article "The ruin of representation", in which he argues that the feature of the inevitable implication of horizons defeats idealism.

The idea of a necessary implication that is absolutely imperceptible to the subject directed on the object, only discovered after the fact upon reflection, thus not produced in the present, that is, produced unbeknownst to me, puts an end to the ideal of representation and the subject's sovereignty, as well as to the idealism according to which nothing could enter into me surreptitiously. (DEH, 116)

By emphasizing that the horizon cannot appear manifestly to consciousness directed toward an object but is always recognized only retrospectively, Levinas interprets the paradox that, in idealism, what constitutes is conditioned by what is supposed to be constituted as a “deep-seated passion”(ibid.) that leads idealism to its end. That being said, it seems that Levinas’s reading of Husserl could be perceived as somewhat forceful. This is because, for Husserl, the implicit horizon is indeed indeterminate, but this does not mean that it lacks determinacy altogether (cf. Hua I, 83). Rather, through a certain degree of expectation and typification, it remains manageable within the framework of object constitution in intentional analysis.

Levinas offers a unique interpretation of the horizon, focusing on sensory qualities that are not fully perceived yet play a determinative role for the subject. This emphasis serves to highlight that Husserl’s idealism is already conditioned, thereby establishing an argument that leads to its abandonment. This is precisely why Levinas stated in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* that the characteristics of the horizon undermine idealism. The distinctive feature of Levinas’s phenomenological description lies in analyzing the anti-idealist situation in which thought is unknowingly conditioned by what is thought. Furthermore, he articulates this anti-idealistic conditioning through an inquiry into the concrete.

4. Enjoyment as a realism

Nevertheless, Levinas’s “intentional analysis” accompanied by his critique of idealism, can no longer be considered “intentional” in the Husserlian sense. Therefore, this paper challenges Husserl’s position that “phenomenology is eo ipso transcendental idealism” and seeks to justify Levinas’s argument as a non-idealist phenomenology that carries out the description of experience through something other than intentionality.

What deserves attention here is the discussion of enjoyment in *Totality and infinity*. For the description of enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity* can be read as a concrete development of the idea that enjoyment is not reducible to the subject’s perception but rather nurtures subjectivity itself, thus leading idealist subjectivity to its end ⁴⁾.

The body naked and indigent is the very reverting, irreducible to a thought, of representation into life, of the subjectivity that represents into life which is sustained by these representations and lives of them; its indigence — its needs — affirm “exteriority” as non-constituted, prior to all affirmation. (TI, 127)

Levinas contrasts representational intentionality with the enjoyment. He attempts to reverse Husserlian idealism which reduces reality to the content of thought, into the realism of life. This “reverting” does not mean reducing all the dimensions of representation to enjoyment. Its purpose is to point out that the intentional act, that Levinas calls “representation”, finds conditions for its own production, and to draw attention to the dimension of enjoyment that conditions representation. Levinas’s enjoyment is not a vague or subordinate thought, but the reception of the sensual quality of the elements which becomes the content of life. The sensibility of enjoyment has a function quite different from representation, and shapes existential

satisfaction itself (cf. TI, 135). Enjoyment, therefore, is an experience in which sensual qualities play a substantial role for us in a non-intentional way at the basis of life.

Finally, a synopsis of the phenomenological positions of Husserl, Ingarden, and Levinas is warranted. First, for Husserl, sense-data are components of consciousness as well as acts, and are only explained as perceptual experiences by the apprehension (*Auffassung*) of acts (cf. Hua III/1, 86). It is not admitted that sense-data are independent of my consciousness and condition our lives. Therefore, Husserl's position can be characterized as transcendental idealism. In contrast, Ingarden asserts that sense-data do not belong to consciousness, but have some connection to the world as itself. The being in the world is not exhausted to the purely intentional object, but there is something fundamentally different from it. In addition, Levinas considers that the sensual quality does not belong to our consciousness, nor is it material for perception. It is provided by the elements, and we live from it (*vivre de ...*). The quality of the elements is something realistic that nourishes and conditions the subject before it becomes an intentional object. Thus, the claims of Ingarden and Levinas, though in different ways, can each be regarded as a form of phenomenological realism.

Conclusion

The critical point from the perspective of phenomenological realism can be summarized as follows: the underlying layer of reality is external to consciousness and plays a substantial, non-intentional role in our experience. The discussion of enjoyment reveals that sensual qualities do not belong to consciousness, nor are they constituted by intentionality. It can be said that enjoyment plays a substantial role in my experience by nourishing the subject before representation. Nevertheless, it is also true that Levinas maintains the fundamental phenomenological stance of describing experience from a first-person perspective, whether in discussions of enjoyment or ethics. Consequently, by conceptualizing Levinas as a form of phenomenological realism, the philosophical legacy and critical dimensions of Husserlian phenomenology can be re-evaluated in a coherent manner.

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Note

- 1) The central argument of this paper is based on my previous work “A Realist Interpretation of the Theory of Enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity*: In What Sense Is Levinas Phenomenological? [in Japanese],” *Husserl Studies* vol. 13, 2016, pp. 1-21.
- 2) Criticism of Levinas’s “Theory of Intuition” was presented by his mentor, Jean Hering, and an American phenomenologist, Dorion Cairns (Hering 1932, 479; Cairns 2007, 345). After reading Cairns’s report, Husserl stated that Levinas had deprived his phenomenology of its original meaning (cf. Bw VI, 458).
- 3) Cf. Strasser 1987; Janicaud 1991; Marion 1997; Pelluchon 2020. However, whether this characteristic is viewed positively or negatively varies depending on the commentator.

4) In the section II of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas repeatedly emphasizes that enjoyment is a non-intentional relation (cf. TI, 123; 169).