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POLEMOLGY AND XENOLOGY: WALDENFELS AND THE STING OF THE ALIEN

ABSTRACT

After explaining why phenomenology of the alien cannot be counted among traditional philosophical disciplines, the author explores why all of European history can be read as the “shading of the alien” (*Verblendung des Fremden*), although not in the sense of mere disregarding, neglecting or denying of the alien, but disciplining it, manipulating and exploiting it. The alien has not been forgotten for centuries, it was always in the European focus, but only as an instance through which the sense of power was traditionally constructed. Following the basic presumptions of Bernhard Waldenfels’ phenomenology of the alien the article presents the shading of the alien as analogous to the process of its naturalization. As if the tradition of European colonialism can be best understood in the key of *maître et possesseur de l’étranger*. That is to say, the European legacy shows, in an extraordinary manner, that the alien can be transformed into a resource, from which we can appropriate and assimilate everything. A crucial insight for Waldenfels is also that strangeness is not reducible to a narrow segment of reality, whether it is culture, religion or art-based, because strangeness is a radical dimension that transcends all regions.

KEYWORDS

Waldenfels,
phenomenology, alien,
polemology, xenology

The irreducibility of the stranger to an enemy

The phenomenology of the alien is not a new discipline among the already known philosophical disciplines. It can hardly be a new discipline, since to be considered as new, it must be determined by a new, previously unknown objective determination, or an entirely new methodology. A new method creates new forms of thought, which cannot be reduced to previous philosophical experiences. The phenomenology of the alien is not a new discipline because its topic is not a topic, and its object is not an object. Strangeness cannot be considered a traditional philosophical phenomenon, as it never exists by itself. The alien is always alien for someone or to someone, it is a category of a relation and it is not possible to perceive it without relating to someone or something. Strangeness is not tied to the sense of failure or perdition, it’s not just a simple failed misunderstanding. The experience of the alien is not like other experiences; it cannot be “grafted” to the previously experienced.

The experience of the alien is a diversion, a fissure, a break – it slices through the harmony of the spontaneous temporal fabric of consciousness. It disrupts me, being

in contact with it causes me to lose my thread, I lose my bearings, the ground beneath me shakes. The experience of the alien could have validity as a kind of an exercise, and even as an unsolicited and unbidden introduction into phenomenology. If the first methodological gesture, made by the phenomenologist as a routine, is tied to the suspension of all adopted and habitual validations, of all natural to us, then we have no better experience or “mundane” call for phenomenological discourse, than the experience of questioning everything intimate and known through the alien.

Contact with the alien can be considered “ground zero”, an event that opens a new horizon, not in the unknown exterior but within us. The alien does not provide us with new insights, but provides new means of seeing, by confronting us with the entity we were unable to see: “withdrawal goes beyond my own abilities by morphing them into the experienced impossible” (Waldenfels 2009: 111).

However, the affirmative observation of the withdrawal (*Entzug*), as one of the crucial elements of the experience of the alien, is not self-explanatory. What remains beyond our reach, is, in a certain way, implied, indicated and announced; otherwise we would know nothing about it. The game of presence and absence, understanding and not understanding, accessibility and inaccessibility fundamentally defines the alien. It is important to mention that the absent and inaccessible cannot be reduced to pure nothingness. In the alien, the negated achieves a specific existential value, the character of an incentive, stimulation or a challenge. In that which withdraws, we often find something that attracts. Some charm, objection or request, and when they are completely absent, what withdraws is no longer my concern, and I do not perceive it as such (Waldenfels 2001: 91). Even though the lures of withdrawal can be of use to determine the truly common in a community, it can also function as an instance of provocation. Something that incites in all instances, which calls for a change or self-examination in tradition, is transformed to something that is close, known and confidential. European history can be read as the “shading of the alien” (*Verblendung des Fremden*), but not in the sense of the disregarding, neglecting or denying of the alien, but disciplining it, manipulating and exploiting it. The alien has not been forgotten for centuries, it was always in the European focus, but only as an instance through which the sense of power was traditionally constructed: “Reducing something unknown to something known calms the mind and also gives a sense of power” (Nietzsche 1980: 93). The tradition of the relationship with the alien is at the same time the legacy of its removal from the stage, placing it to an inferior position, to a lower level in the hierarchy. European history takes the shape of the hidden, or the invisible of the *polemos* with the alien.

Even though tradition used to liken it with the enemy, the experience of the alien has nothing to do with hostility. The etymological oscillation between hospitality and hostility, which has long burdened the Latin term *hostis* (Waldenfels 1997: 45), completely failed to observe the fundamental, irreducible difference between the alien and the enemy. That difference implies that the encounter with the enemy animates and spurs the potentiation of the Self, while the encounter with the alien works in a different manner, and awakens doubt and mistrust, or for a moment suspends the Self. The enemy pursues the potentials of the Self to their outer limits, while the alien guides them beyond that. The clash with the enemy draws the community closer together, while the encounter with the alien

potentially transforms it, or even brings dissent or division to it. Unlike hostility, which is usually mutual, apart from dramatic historical instances in which the enemy is literally created, the experience of the alien allows one-sidedness. If we look alien to someone, that does not necessarily mean that that person will trigger the experience of the alien in us. Waldenfels sees the alien marked with a “sting”, which calls me, taunts me, wants me to respond to it. Unlike a bee sting, which requires the reaction of a remedy, which helps me remove the pain and discomfort, the sting of the alien leads us into the world of the special phenomenon. I do not reach for anything beyond me to clash with the alien and to neutralize its effects. Something else is at play here.

The strangeness of God in the image of a traveler or a beggar

Waldenfels joins the line of ancient tradition, which, when confronted with the alien, sees a key moment for metamorphosis. It looks as if the alien, for a phenomenologist, plays a role akin to that of negation for dialectics. Without the alien there is no true change, “development”, the Self lives on from the logic of self-assertion, it maintains and perpetuates a certain established hierarchy. In a word: there can be no Self without the metamorphosis of the alien (Waldenfels 2008: 275). If we were to lose the alien, our world would be completely void of the secret, of existence and history, and such a world could not be referred to as a spiritual one. Complete transparency is equal to pitch dark; the absolute understanding of the totality is the end of all understanding. As it fiercely opposed the tradition of expurgation, “shadings” of the alien, Waldenfels’ phenomenology did not wish to reduce it to a mere self-knowledge medium, a necessary, but temporary step on the path of the self-awakening of the spirit.

The Self continuously meets the alien, but that alien which is “relative”: “The inclusion of the alien does not bring anything revolutionary, as long as that strangeness shows only the revolutionary side, as a necessary but temporary phase for the spirit to find itself, in which everything that is, and all that are, participate. The alien is for me and for us that in which we have not yet recognized ourselves” (Waldenfels 2002: 187). The learning process implies continuous encounters with what was once alien, which later becomes adopted, domesticated, to become a fundamental part of what we consider our own world. It is clear we come into contact with the alien throughout our lives, where it is not so highly emphasized that the standard European methods of dealing with the alien by default do not leave the bounds of the good ol’ egology. The shading of the alien is analogous to the process of its naturalization. As if the tradition of European colonialism can be best understood through the key of *maître et possesseur de l'étranger*. In a word, the European legacy shows in an extraordinary manner that the alien can be transformed into a resource, from which we can appropriate and assimilate everything of use. Like Descartes’ treatment of nature, we could say that the traditional relationship towards the alien occurs within the boundaries of management and proprietorship. Such a relationship towards the alien is similar to trade, in which for a minimal investments and for the lowest cost, I try to obtain maximal profit. The alien is there to encourage me, make me stronger, to be at my disposal, to develop my capacities

and increase my resources. What remains after that process is completely outside of my sphere of interest and the focus of my attention.

When the Old Testament prophet said that only a stranger can teach him, he focused on a position in which true learning and a true step beyond are impossible when everything is known, domestic and habitual. Isaiah and Elijah wanted nothing but the revolutionary; they did not even consider a world in which they could find a variation of themselves. Also, they knew that the desired, promised human world is not possible with the easily obtainable, the “relative” but through the distant, hard to reach, the “relative” alien. The true message of the alien cannot be condensed to enrichment, enlargement of the already known, but is recognizable as the constantly replenishing self-knowing of personal finiteness, and through that, directing the subjectivity beyond its boundaries: “the radical alien exists only if the state in which we exist, is not everything” (Waldenfels 2017: 308).

It is probable that the civilization roots of such thinking are older than the Old Testament’s strangeness of God, whose language is necessarily incomprehensible and whose apparitions cannot be recognized and interpreted in everyday registries, nor measured with the usual criterion. Because of that, *theophany* is traditionally displayed through a symbolical overturn of the existing order and existing values. If he appears as a man, the transcendental God could not be a magnificent, measured and wise aristocrat, nor the beautiful hero with lush hair and a seductive visage, or a fearless warrior. That way he would lose his transcendent elements and would be placed at the pinnacle of value of the known and desired. On the contrary, the apparition of the greatest and highest, but also alien order must appropriate the appearance which is despised, humiliated and marginalized in the domestic. The divine alien is, though that, incarnated in the image of a domestic alien, a pariah, the humiliated: “The main characteristic for theophany is that the divine or demonic, usually appears as a small, inconspicuous man, usually [...] a traveler or a beggar” (Čajkanović 1973: 141).

The modern traces of the Old Testament spirit are usually found in the phenomenology of Emanuel Levinas, to which Waldenfels owes far more than one would assume at first glance. If we follow the traces of Husserl’s term of constitution, we will see that Levinas moves the source of the constitution from the Self to the Other, from ego to alien. What initially marked the specificity of conscious life - a synonym for personal productivity and freedom and always started anew - is now given to others who initiate: “my own birth at someone else’s request. To exist means to exist for someone else, to “subsist”. Institutions come from substitutions” (Waldenfels 2005: 214). Does such a gesture appropriately mark the modern alienation of the individual, his irreversible estrangement, and through that the necessity of rebirth, starting from “the elsewhere”. In short, is the phenomenology of the alien the final proof that we have all become aliens?

Transcendental or empirical strangeness?

We can easily recall moments when, even to ourselves, we appeared extraordinary, when we surprised ourselves, or we felt and thought of ourselves in a way that made us feel alien. Does this imply that we are all, in essence, aliens? If that is the case, strangeness loses its specialty, it becomes universal, and ceases to be alien in the

inherit sense of the word. When observed within the confines of itself, strangeness necessarily falls into the trap of generalizing the strangeness that cancels itself out (Waldenfels 1994: 29). According to the well-known aporia of selfsame strangeness, employed by Julia Kristeva, its outcome leads to the direct cancellation of the previously established thesis: “The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners” (Kristeva 1991: 192). Unlike Kristeva, Waldenfels’ phenomenology of the alien follows Husserl’s, Levinas’ and Derrida’s tracks, when it insists on the conservation of the alien, as a direct philosophical correlate of gestures of hospitality, and also all those forms of interpersonal relationships, which counter assimilation and all known forms of the violent suffocation of strangeness.

Unlike the Freudian psychoanalytical approach, whose emphasis was on the disharmony and discomfort *within each individual*, man’s unconquerable strangeness in the world, the phenomenologists find the moments of harmony, that is, the disharmony in *interpersonal relations* much more significant. The psychoanalytical interest for the individual is incomparable and incomprehensible to the phenomenological interests in the collective, the intersubjectivity. It appears as if Husserl and Derrida, despite all inaccessibility and irreducibility which define the alien, focus on those moments of harmony, transcendental equality, thanks to which my primordial worldview is shaped. This world is never my private world, and its nature, including all human products, I experience exclusively through intersubjectivity. In the *Paris lectures*, Husserl particularly accentuated the term *mutuality*, in which the inaccessibility of the other becomes my inaccessibility to the other: “It is a fact that I experience other minds as real, and not only do I experience them in conjunction with nature, but as interlaced into one whole with nature. Furthermore, I experience other minds in unique manner. Not only do I experience them as spatial presentations psychologically interlaced in the realm of nature, but I also experience them as experiencing this selfsame world which I experience. I also experience them experiencing me in the same way that I experience them, and so on” (Husserl 1998: 34).

Derrida hits the mark in reading Levinas’ *Violence and Metaphysics*, when he asks the crucial question – the empirical or transcendent character of strangeness? In the background is the decision to go with either symmetry or asymmetry. From one end, Derrida agrees with Levinas in that the origin of violence is tied to the translation of the alien to my empirical ego, interpreting it as nothing more than a variation of myself. In a word, even if my empirical self is the inevitable starting point towards the alien, we inevitably face the possibility of the strange being entirely reduced to it: “every reduction of the other to a real moment of my life, its reduction to the state of empirical alter-ego, is an empirical possibility, or rather eventuality, which is called violence [...] For, on the contrary, to gain access to the egoity of the alter ego as if to its alterity itself is the most peaceful gesture possible” (Derrida 1978: 159–160). On the other hand, Derrida does underline the significance of the analogical presentation, which is persistently present in our every observation, which continuously reminds us of the primordial origin of symmetry between the different means of the function of my embodied Self and the Self of others, with which in synchrony, in a common manner, I experience the same world: “Dissymmetry itself would be impossible without this symmetry, which is not of the world, and which, having no real aspect, imposes no limit upon alterity and dissymmetry—makes them possible, on the contrary” (Derrida 1978: 157).

Unlike Derrida, it appears as though Levinas and Waldenfels emphasize the interlacing of the empirical and transcendental, stressing the asymmetrical relationship towards alien subjectivity. If the transcendental marks the “pure” consciousness, the type of consciousness which, through the phenomenological methodology, managed to abstract from the *validity* of all mundane contents of conscious acts (Szilasi 1959: 65–66), then a question can be asked – can the phenomenology of the alien really be constituted if we keep solely with Husserl’s position? Can we go further, and say something more meaningful about the experience of the alien, apart from the formal determination about the “accessibility of the initially inaccessible”? Derrida follows Husserl’s transcendental symmetry, mutuality, equality. For Levinas, it is no longer about the experience of the alien in the sense of a specific type of experience. It is no longer about the establishment of objectivity, but about the elementary precondition of subjectivization. Levinas and Waldenfels insist on an asymmetrical relationship, which by no means shows the desire to be subjugated (Dallmayr 2001: 151), but the precondition of every true personal relation. Everything from this side of calculative symmetry – love, friendship, attention, responsibility, all those relations are not based on the golden rule (treat others the way you want to be treated), but happen as asymmetrical relations. It is not about losing yourself as a result of the alien, giving myself to the other and irreversibly dissolving in the ontical mundane, but rather about leaving the confines of the closed immanence of the interior: “the quintessential experience is not that of reception, meditation or bliss, but that of exit and break” (Guibal 1980: 13). Naturally, such experience cannot be perceived on the plain of a thought experiment, because it requires an embodied alien: “The alien is not pure, but is mundane and social self” (Waldenfels 2015: 52–53).

What must the reality of the phenomenology of the alien be like?

Must such a self also be seen through the “mundane and social eyes”? Without doubt, one of the most precious philosophical traditions suggests the correlation between reality and insight. The way the world appears is subject to the way we perceive it. An altered manner of observing does not solely bring new information and uncover the facets of the world, but also shows a radically different world. Here is where the question about the altering character of reality, due to the introduction of new means of examination, or a new type of rationality, becomes interesting. There’s only one world, but it is subject to change. Phenomenologically speaking, the historical changes in the world present a dependable consequence of the alteration of the way it has been perceived.

Unlike Marx’s last thesis about Feuerbach, phenomenology always claimed that a different worldview necessarily conveys a different world. What would rationality be then, for the phenomenology of the alien? What type of reality is comfortable with the phenomenon of the alien? Would it be reducible to a simple discourse about alienation, which inevitably shifts between the confronted sides of romantic aesthetic affirmation and Marxist revolutionary negation? Where Waldenfels tinkers with the thinking of the future, starting with passages and thresholds, and not with projects (Waldenfels 2008: 98), he also points out a different type of rationality. His structure touches the term of responsiveness, being that it is initiated

behind established meaning, conventional norms and existing rules. The vision of rationality is always interlaced with limitations with whose confines the means of viewing its subject occurs. An important insight for Waldenfels is also that strangeness is not reducible to a narrow segment of reality, whether it is culture, religion or art-based: “For me, it is not a question of regional ontology, aesthetics, religion; the alien is a radical dimension that transcends all regions” (Escoubas and Waldenfels 2000: 206).

The alien as the source of civilization and the “objectiveness” of the world

If strangeness is a child of otherness, then the phenomenology of the alien was inconceivable before the terms of the Other and otherness attained highest possible ranks within philosophical terminology and its problematization of things. It certainly does not start where the others simply became the subject of philosophical reflection, and aliens happened to be spotted among them. On the contrary, the time for insight into strangeness came when we recognized the foundations of objectiveness in those aliens. Where Descartes found God, Husserl found another man. The phenomenological confrontation with solipsism no longer dealt with divine attributes, but rather relied on the radicalization of transcendent reduction, on the *experience of the alien*, which allowed the attesting objectiveness of transcendent knowing: “I obviously cannot have the ‘alien’ or ‘other’ as experience, and therefore cannot have the sense ‘Objective world’ as an experiential sense, without having this stratum in actual experience” (Husserl 1973: 127).

Waldenfels’ interpretation of Husserl’s thesis shows that experience of the alien has already done its job before we uttered a single word about the world. The unspoken argument of Husserl’s term of intersubjectivity tells us that every conviction about a reliable, stable, “objective” in this world exists due to the often-unconscious meeting with another person. The analogical representation of everything he does, and what I could do if I were him, gives me a precious confirmation that my worldviews and convictions are not just fictional, but are based in the common structures of humanity.

In the end, perhaps the crucial premise of the phenomenology of the alien would be that the source of civilization is equal to the source of reality. Both hide in the company of aliens (Levinas 2009: 248). The focus of the interpersonal relation towards the ontological relation is throughout depicted quite credibly. That relation, according to Levinas, is not based on joint mutuality, harmony and balance. On the contrary, the source asymmetry is the basis of rationality, as the other holds uncontested preeminence. Unlike the traditional ties of egology and ontology, self and ownership, through the ontology of the guaranteed care of affirmation, strengthening and self-preservation, the ego, dialogical reality, Levinas notes, is based on the thesis that through immanence, there is no and cannot be any meaning (Levinas 1972: 41).

A being that does not transcend, does not leave itself so it can go to another being, disables itself from finding any meaning. The price of unlimited trust in the self and the immanence in the modernity is paid by these phenomena, or “existentials” which we tied to the seclusion of our existence. The decay in which the

Dasein is exposed in the everyday, Waldenfels attributes to the unconscious “immunity” of the fundamental ontologists to the elementary impulses of the alien which drive experience: “Heidegger’s Self is not decaying thanks to a mere self amnesia of here-being, but to its seclusion from the phatic impulses of the alien, which stimulate our experience” (Waldenfels 2015: 277).

The resumé of the phenomenological exploration of intersubjectivity with Husserl could be summarized in the following manner: the transcendental We precedes the transcended I, and the root of all rationality hides in interpersonal relations. The root of intelligibility is not autonomous, and knowledge does not come from itself. Even if we condense it to a life-world, “a realm of subjective phenomena which have remained ‘anonymous’” (Husserl 1970: 111), such a realm is not based on some autonomous knowing attainment. Furthermore, the entire phenomenological movement after Husserl can be explored via the horizon of the crucial question, which ties strangeness and worldness: “it has never been recognized that the otherness of the foreign becomes extended to the whole world, as its ‘Objectivity’, giving it this sense in the first place (Husserl 1960: 147).

Protology is xenology

Starting with Aristotle, the ontological interest was shaped and wrapped around different ways of predicating being. Waldenfels calls for a multiplicity of approaches towards other-being, a commitment to a multidimensional approach which refuses to level different means of other-being: “not only being, but other-being too if affected by Aristoteles’ *polachos legatei*: it can be presented in different ways” (Waldenfels 2007: 424). Being a devotee of the first philosophy meant speaking in a neutral, third person, not only to anonymize the individual but to also relieve it of all personal markings, memories and history.

It turns out the ontological third person is not a monolithic and monotonous discursivity, but a multitude of different and mutually irreducible origins of thought. Different methods of discourse about the being have named a multitude that does not give up on self-reflection and finally merges into one. A devotee of *prote philosophia* has, with equal devotion, thought on different roads and moved though incomparable paths. His goal was not to find the most productive way to describe the being and eliminate all other means. On the contrary, thinking in registers of multitude and difference did not leave any of them behind. The former rationality of the logos assumed its load capacity from different expressions. However, such ability, from the perspective of phenomenology of the alien remains void of form, measure and boundary, and thus, every foundation: “To a living being that has the logos, nothing is strange. The well know operation lack only in that if becomes infinite, it also loses its foundation” (Waldenfels 1998: 34).

The study of the first, protology, acknowledged all different methods at once, which proved to be as rich in meaning as the being itself. From the perspective of modern thinkers, the interlacing of protology and xenology is proof enough for a thesis that classical thinking was not one of neglect, but actually of too much care.

The first ontological word of modernity was uttered when first-person singular moved consciously from speech which was once primarily practically oriented, to

the anonymous discursivity of first philosophy. While the jurisdiction of first philosophy was once reserved strictly for the questions about *What*, for thinking about the essence and purpose of existing things, now it starts to include the previously unthinkable *How* and even *Who*, which no longer rejected out front the strangeness of subjectivity. The neutrality of the source speech of ontology conceded its place to the first-person speech. Afterwards, due to, in good part the phenomenology of the alien, it moved towards decentralizing the subject, in the spirit of “overpowering the I, which decisively contributed to the revelation of alterity” (Waldenfels 2015: 33). When observed through the perspective of first philosophy, the process of civilization is not tied to the perception of freedom, it is pointed in the direction opposite to any kind of perception. If we can even consider the term of development, Waldenfels’ subject does not aim toward self-foundation and self-determination but comes to itself by leaving itself. It does not come from something it has, but from something it literary lacks. Overpowering the I mostly brings the term of reality which is always something more than it is. According to Waldenfels, the “more” is always an expression of an order that is not based on itself but allows for the “moments of extraordinary and weird” (Waldenfels 2017: 12).

In the attempt to move further from Husserl’s stance on “surplus of meaning” (*Mehrmeinung*), which claims that things are always something more than we know about them, Waldenfels’ term of responsiveness brings a new moment. Unlike Husserl’s view, which sees the source of entire being in transcendental subjectivity, Waldenfels pays close attention to the reality beyond the domestic and individual. It is not there to help us affirm the objective world, but defines us by asking, requesting, demanding something from us. It makes an impression on us, forms a certain *pathos*, from which our every response comes. The logos of phenomenology of the alien brings a new term of experience which is no longer in the realm of the duality of noesis and noema, but the *pathos* and *respons*. This heir of Husserl’s intentionality will not be able to solve the crisis of European sciences but might be able to solve the crisis of European humanness. There is no doubt that the road beyond the endangered, levelled humanity can have a responsive prefix. In the end, *starting elsewhere* seems far more appealing than any known European response.

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Polemologija i ksenologija: Valdenfels i žaoka stranog

Apstrakt

Nakon razjašnjavaња zbog čega fenomenologija stranog ne može biti ubrojana među tradicionalne filozofske discipline, autor ispituje zašto bi celokupna evropska istorija mogla biti čitana kao „zasenčenje stranog“, ali ne u smislu pukog odbacivanja, zanemarivanja ili poricanja stranog, nego njegovog disciplinovanja, manipulisanja, eksploataisanja. Strano nije bilo vekovima zaboravljeno, ono je uvek bilo u evropskom fokusu, ali samo kao instanca posredstvom koje je tradicionalno konstruisan osećaj moći. Prateći osnovne pretpostavke fenomenologije stranog Bernharda Valdenfelsa, članak uočava zasenčenje stranog kao analogno procesu njegove naturalizacije. Kao da tradicija evropskog kolonijalizma može biti najbolje shvaćena zahvaljujući ključu *gospodar i vlasnik stranog*. Rečju, evropsko nasleđe na izuzetan način pokazuje da strano može biti transformisano u resurs od kojeg možemo da prisvojimo i asimilujemo sve što nam može biti od koristi. Valdenfelsov presudan uvid glasi da stranost ne može biti svedena na uzak segment realnosti, bila ona vezana za kulturu, umetnost ili religiju, jer je ona radikalna dimenzija koja transcendirira sve regije.

Ključne reči: Valdenfels, fenomenologija, strano, polemologija, ksenologija