

Hyper-Phenomenology as Pathos for the Stranger: *Laudatio* for Bernhard Waldenfels

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues,

Distinguished Herr Professor Bernhard Waldenfels,

It is a singular honor to be able to offer, on occasion of the Blue Diamond Hermes Award, a *laudatio* for Professor Bernhard Waldenfels, one of the most significant living figures in the realm of contemporary Continental philosophy and prominent masters of the phenomenological school. And this is literally a “singular” experience, as a demand that entrusts me with responding, which involves me and no one else. Although I know for certain that I cannot render justice to such a concession of trust—and this is true whenever a response engages an invocation coming from the Other—I also know that my attempt to respond is at least genuine, as it is rooted in a long and on-going history: one of a master and a student; one of an *entretien infini* made of *pathos* and response.

No one better than Bernhard Waldenfels has attempted to render manifest this experience of singularity and of singularity in experience in his phenomenological doctrine devoted to the *leitmotif* of alienness, *Fremdheit*.

Depicting the main trajectory of his philosophical work implies, in the first place, referring to his original appropriation of the phenomenological tradition: mainly

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his critical reading of Edmund Husserl's transcendental approach,² on the one hand, and his theoretical adherence to the doctrine of his master, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the other.³ By the same token, to fully seize the amplitude of Waldenfels' philosophical endeavor, one cannot but notice his perceptive engagement with the major representatives of contemporary French thought: Foucault, Lévinas, Ricoeur, and Derrida, just to name a few.⁴

In line with these authors' philosophical thrust, Waldenfels' phenomenological doctrine can be located within the realm of what one may generally define as a "philosophy of intersubjectivity." Indeed, the main concern he shares with these thinkers is to bring to light the irreducible intervention of alterity within the life of the subject. This is an intervention which, against all metaphysical attitudes, renders impossible a unifying, substantial, and totalizing systematic closure, thereby indicating an irreducible confrontation with contingency and plurality in experience.

Waldenfels offers an original contribution within this philosophical constellation, namely, his re-interpretation of the "category" of alterity through the motive of alienness/strangeness. Thanks to this shift, Waldenfels charges the phenomenon of alterity with a concreteness and density that exceeds all merely conceptual determinations. As a consequence, the Other gets freed from the latent danger of a mere logico-ontological definition, constantly separating it from the abstract pole of the Same.⁵ Through the notion of strangeness, Waldenfels subsequently takes on board the task of developing a phenomenology which explicitly

² Cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Das Zwischenreich des Dialogs. Sozialphilosophische Untersuchungen in Anschluss an Edmund Husserl* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971); Id., *In den Netzen der Lebenswelt* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), chaps. 1-2; Id., *Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, chaps. 3-4; Id., *Grenzen der Normalisierung. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 2* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), ch. 1; Id., *Idiome des Denkens. Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge II* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2005), ch. 3; Id., *Sozialität und Alterität. Modi sozialer Erfahrung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), ch. 10.

³ Cf. Id., *Der Spielraum des Verhaltens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1980), chaps. 1-2; Id., *In den Netzen der Lebenswelt*, ch. 3; Id., *Der Stachel des Fremden* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), ch. 13; Id., *Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge*, chaps. 7-10; Id., *Sinnesschwellen. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 3* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1999); Id., *Das leibliche Selbst. Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des Leibes* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000); Id., *Idiome des Denkens*, chaps. 4-6; Id., *Ortverschiebungen, Zeitverschiebungen. Modi leibhaftiger Erfahrung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2009); Id., *Sinne und Künste im Wechselspiel. Modi ästhetischer Erfahrung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), ch. 5; Id., *Hyperphänomene. Modi hyperbolischer Erfahrung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), ch. 4.

⁴ Cf. Id., *Phänomenologie in Frankreich* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983); Id., *Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge*; Id., *Idiome des Denkens*; Id., *Sozialität und Alterität*, chaps. 13-15.

⁵ Cf. Id., *Topographie des Fremden. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 1* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), 21f.

accepts the challenge of rendering manifest the forms and extent to which the call of the alien reveals itself as a genuine motive in the unstable and pluralistic terrain of experience, thereby remaining irreducible to any strategy of ontological, logical or, more generally, metaphysical neutralization.

Moreover, the plurality of ambits in which the alien appears prompts Waldenfels' analysis to not limit itself to the sole results of the phenomenological research *strictu sensu*. Rather, he expands the spectrum of his investigation in the direction of a wide variety of scholarly fields, such as social, political, and legal philosophy,⁶ ethics,⁷ ethnology,⁸ psychology, and psychoanalysis.⁹ Additionally, Waldenfels devotes special attention to the arts and literature.¹⁰

This *laudatio* is an apt place to recall at least the central notions and stages of Waldenfels' wide-ranging and conceptually dense phenomenology of the alien.

1. To the Stranger Itself!

The point of departure of Waldenfels' phenomenological investigation is clear. As long as we insist on treating the alien or stranger as an immediately accessible and definable *something* or *someone*, i.e., as long as we regard it as an entity facing us from our perspective, we would miss it completely. This is because alienness, in line with such a perceptual stance – regardless of whether or not it is characterized by openness or repulsion toward the alien – would collapse into the traditional “metaphysic[al] way of thinking,”¹¹ centered in the primacy of the own, which is granted undeniable ontological precedence and thus hierarchical superiority vis-à-vis the stranger.¹² Crucially, by means of such a philosophical tendency, a peculiar conception of experience is imposed or inevitably confirmed. Alienness, however, by destabilizing,

⁶ Cf. Id., *Das Zwischenreich des Dialogs*; Id., *In den Netzen der Lebenswelt*; Id., *Ordnung im Zwielicht* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1987); Id., *Grenzen der Normalisierung*; Id., *Schattenrisse der Moral* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006); Id., *Sozialität und Alterität*; Id., *Globalität, Lokalität, Digitalität. Herausforderungen der Phänomenologie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2022).

⁷ Cf. Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung. Phänomenologie – Psychoanalyse – Phänomenotechnik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), ch. 8; Id., *Schattenrisse der Moral*; Id., *Globalität, Lokalität, Digitalität*, ch. 9.

⁸ Cf. Id., *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 4* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), chaps. 5-6.

⁹ Cf. Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, ch. 7; Id., *Erfahrung, die zur Sprache drängt. Studien zur Psychoanalyse und Psychotherapie aus phänomenologischer Sicht* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019).

¹⁰ Cf. Id., *Sinne und Künste im Wechselspiel*; Id., *Globalität, Lokalität, Digitalität*, ch. 10.

¹¹ Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 270.

¹² Cf. Id., *Der Stachel des Fremden*, 60f.; Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 48f.

ends up necessarily receding before the own. If it appears in experience, it is at the same time destined to be overcome in view of a final reappropriation as the restoration of a presupposed anteriority of ownness.¹³

As is well known, the metaphysical tradition rests precisely upon such an “assumption of a totality without an outside.”¹⁴ In Waldenfels’ words,

I maintain that in the Western tradition, there is a drive toward appropriation such that everything alien is seen as the product of an alienation, a becoming strange(r) to one’s own. Reappropriation takes the form of egocentricity insofar as the alien appears as a modification of the own; it takes the form of logocentricity insofar as it is conceived as a moment of a general reason, be it as a part of a totality of reason, be it as an instantiation of a law of reason.¹⁵

According to Waldenfels, many philosophical approaches reflect this metaphysical approach. To begin with, Hegel’s dialectic, in which “alienness [...] emerges merely as alienation, namely as a transitory phase in a process in which consciousness strives to ‘abolish strangeness’ and ‘discover the world and the present as its own.’”¹⁶ Gadamer’s hermeneutic stance toward alienness follows a similar path. Although his approach assumes more moderate and mitigating tones when compared with Hegel, Gadamer, too, pursues the goal of “overcoming strangeness,”¹⁷ i.e., of restoring understanding as the re-composition of an original realm of sense prevailing over all misunderstandings, which are interpreted as transitory interruptions of meaning.¹⁸ Habermas can be situated in the same trajectory, which starts from a common *logos*, common sense, or communicative reason and, therefore, cannot account for radical instantiations of alienness. In line with Habermas’ stance, only a “relative alien”¹⁹ is conceivable since alienness is taken up in a discursive process that, if successful, realizes the final “inclusion” of the alien in the own.²⁰ As a consequence, by positing an a priori of reciprocity in communication among participants, Habermas precludes

¹³ Cf. Id., *Der Stachel des Fremden*, 61; Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 166f.

¹⁴ Id., *Hyperphänomene*, 32.

¹⁵ Id., *Grenzen der Normalisierung*, 137.

¹⁶ Id., *Verfremdung der Moderne. Phänomenologische Grenzgänge* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001), 20 (in this passus Waldenfels cites Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [1807], in *Werke*, Bd. 3 [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1970], 586).

¹⁷ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede*, 72.

¹⁸ Cf. Id., *Antwortregister* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), 133-137. To this regard cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960).

¹⁹ Bernhard Waldenfels, *In den Netzen der Lebenswelt*, 94ff.

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996). Cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Verfremdung der Moderne*, 44f.

a genuine “inter-realm of dialog” (*Zwischenreich des Dialogs*)²¹ between the own and the alien. Rather, it proves to be a structure which strictly obeys the logic of ownness and, consequently, can at most perform something like a “dialogically staged monologue.”²²

By recalling these examples in the modern Western philosophical tradition, Waldenfels’ critical intent is to warn against a reductive and inauthentic depiction of strangeness. Indeed, dealing properly with strangeness, so he clarifies, does not amount to dealing with a “lack to be remedied,”²³ or a “transitory stage,”²⁴ or even a “modification”²⁵ related to a possibly transformable yet largely structured and fixed “sphere of ownness.”²⁶ Rather, the alien must be understood as “constitutive [of the ‘thing itself’], [...] inherent and touching the ‘roots of all things.’”²⁷

Accordingly, the emergence of such a “radical form of strangeness”²⁸ boils down, for Waldenfels, to this: the alien is to be understood as a primordial *pathos*,²⁹ which invests the self from the very beginning and, therefore, cannot but make itself obtrusive every time the self undergoes an altering experience which pushes it outside itself, i.e., pushes it to a self-transcending.³⁰ Radical alienness speaks inevitably to a form of experience which is always passive and to a phenomenology which is constantly a hyper-phenomenology.³¹ In all these cases, alienness emerges as a form of lived deprivation, a suffered dispossession, or even a “dis-placement,”³² making it impossible for the own to be – to put it in Freud’s well-known turn of phrase – “a master in one’s own house.”³³ More specifically, Waldenfels defines the category of *pathos* as follows:

I take the Greek expression *pathos* or the German expression *Widerfahrnis* to mean that something strikes us, turns out well, or hurts us, like the *touché* from the fencing fight. [...] In experience, someone is not involved in the

²¹ So reads the title of Waldenfels’ *Habilitationsschrift* (1971).

²² Bernhard Waldenfels, *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), 116; cf. also Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 226ff.

²³ Id., *Verfremdung der Moderne*, 51.

²⁴ Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 187.

²⁵ Id., *Verfremdung der Moderne*, 50.

²⁶ Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 27.

²⁷ Id., *Verfremdung der Moderne*, 51; cf. also Id., *Hyperphänomene*, 297.

²⁸ Id., *Verfremdung der Moderne*, 50.

²⁹ Cf. Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*; Id., *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, ch. 2.

³⁰ Cf. Id., *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 82.

³¹ To this regard see esp. Id., *Hyperphänomene*.

³² Id., *Antwortregister*, 270.

³³ Id., *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 120. Waldenfels quotes here the famous passage from Sigmund Freud, *Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychoanalyse* (1917), in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 12: *Werke aus den Jahren 1917-1920* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fisher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 11.

nominative of the author, but rather in the dative or accusative of a *patient* in the broad sense of the term: ‘Something happens *to me*,’ ‘Something has hit *me*.’ [...] We are certainly involved, yet precisely not in the form of autocratic subjects.³⁴

Consequently, Waldenfels points to a shift as to the traditionally consolidated perspective, such that it would be phenomenologically wrong to presuppose the primacy of one’s own experience as an original state of affairs in which something alien would only occasionally and extrinsically occur. What is correct is rather the opposite: the alien intrudes in experience from the very beginning, thereby implying that the own is surely in a position to appropriate the alien, yet not in the sense of a perfect and saturated appropriation.³⁵ In this regard, Waldenfels writes:

The alien is not merely to be found outside myself; rather there is an *alienness in the own*. My speaking, doing, and even my feeling are never completely mine. For, were this not the case, it would not be possible to explain how the self can end up splitting itself off and alienating itself [...]. Ownness comes into being through a never-ending process of appropriation.³⁶

It is not surprising that such a radical characterization of alienness is disturbing to traditionally oriented philosophies. For appropriating the appearance of the alien in the process of dispossessing, destabilizing, and transcending, the self triggers a vexing question: How is it possible to find genuine access to the alien without betraying it? For both, an intentional thematization thereof and the anticipation of its appearance would end up staging it and consequently depriving it of its constitutive “thorniness [*Stache*].”³⁷

We are dealing here with an inextricable dilemma: Either one disfigures the alien by speaking about it – by doing so, in fact, one renders present something which is characterized by its withdrawal from the own – or, because of this withdrawal, one avoids thematizing it.

Crucially, opting for this strict alternative between “saying too much” and “saying nothing” would be a viable strategy provided the phenomenon of the alien and its (im)possible discourse were thereby exhausted. But this is not the case. Waldenfels, in fact, points to a different and more genuine possibility of engaging the alien. This

³⁴ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Sozialität und Alterität*, 20-22.

³⁵ Id., *Verfremdung der Moderne*, 53.

³⁶ Id., *Grenzen der Normalisierung*, 136.

³⁷ Cf. Id., *Der Stachel des Fremden*.

possibility is realized insofar as one starts “speaking *from* the alien” instead of (not) speaking *about* the alien.³⁸

2. A Topography of the Alien Within Experience

Before offering a more detailed description of this mode of engagement with the alien, let us first better grasp the motive of the alien as a primordial withdrawal, deferral, and non-coincidence that inheres in the own. In this regard, Waldenfels, as a radical phenomenologist, eschews speculative insights that find no correspondence in concrete experience. Rather, in as far as he is devoted to the description of the “things themselves,” he is concerned with fundamental dimensions of experience belonging to everyone’s life.³⁹

The first dimension is represented by the experience of time.⁴⁰ This experience refers to the “primordial fact of birth, a primordial past, a ‘past which has never been present’ and which by no means can be my present, as I always come too late to catch it *in flagranti*.”⁴¹ The same is true of the experience of the “name I have, [and which] derive[s] from an external ascription rather than a self-ascription.”⁴² What is usually called a proper name is “received from others like a brand.”⁴³ The same alienness is also implied in the undeniable fact that I was “spoken to [...] before I spoke to others.”⁴⁴ On the one hand, this originary situation proves to be the genealogical basis of every genuine, intersubjective experience, which is founded on a constitutive exposition of the self to the other. On the other hand, this situation also manifests the experience of learning a foreign language, which obviously does not begin at school, but rather starts with learning one’s own mother tongue.⁴⁵ Finally, the daily experience of looking at oneself in the mirror also points to the fact that the self is not originally and fully itself. Rather, it always carries a primordial splitting and alienation within itself. “The mirror,” so Waldenfels specifies,

³⁸ Id., *Sozialität und Alterität*, 22 (emphasis added).

³⁹ Cf. Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 27f.

⁴⁰ Cf. Id., *Antwortregister*, Part II, ch. 10; Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, ch. 4; Id., *Schattenrisse der Moral*, ch. 10; Id., *Ortverschiebungen, Zeitverschiebungen*. Id., *Globalität, Lokalität, Digitalität*, ch. 9.

⁴¹ Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 30. Waldenfels’ citation is taken from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 280.

⁴² Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 193.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, ch. 4.

confronts us [...] with an image in which we recognize ourselves and yet do not recognize ourselves since the seeing and the seen never coincide. The fright called forth by the own image, which can emanate from the mirror image or a photograph and in extreme cases can even lead to attempting suicide, would be incomprehensible if ‘I’ were simply ‘I’ or if I could ever completely return to myself. I encounter myself in the gaze of others.⁴⁶

In this context, Waldenfels’ reference to Rimbaud’s famous refrain “*JE est un autre*” proves to be particularly true.⁴⁷

However, Waldenfels does not limit alienness to an experience of a primordial intrusion into and disruption of self-reference⁴⁸ to the sole microsphere of the individual self. Rather, he extends this experience to the macro-sphere of the self, namely, as the institutional orders in the realm of which communal life is inscribed and becomes intelligible.⁴⁹ For all world orders – be they social, cultural, or politico-legal – make manifest that they are inhabited by alienness insofar as their contingent and selective character refers to the fact that they make “something appear *so* and not *otherwise*.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, orders enable some things, rendering them accessible and including them in a realm of the own, while they also disable other things, rendering them impossible, inaccessible, and belonging to the sphere of the alien. In other words: every imaginable order includes and excludes in the process of setting boundaries.⁵¹ This demarcation thus determines an internal sphere and, in the very process of doing so, inevitably produces the possibility of its transgression. In this context, the alien speaks to what time and again constitutively “eludes the order’s grasp”⁵² and thereby presents itself as the extraordinary transgression of boundaries. Accordingly, one could define the alien as the *otherwise* constantly calling an order into question. Alienness thus enlivens the originary contingency of order and, by the same token, attests to the impossibility of its ever becoming all-encompassing.

Moreover, no order, as originally inhabited by the alien, can raise the claim to a total self-ownership or an absolute own founding moment which would legitimize an

⁴⁶ Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 30f.

⁴⁷ Cf. Id., *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 22.

⁴⁸ Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'intrus* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).

⁴⁹ Cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Ordnung im Zwielficht*.

⁵⁰ Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 10.

⁵¹ This basic logic of functioning of orders is perceptively developed – in concordance with Waldenfels’ insights – in the legal-phenomenological investigations by Hans Lindahl, *Fault Lines of Globalization. Legal Order and the Politics of A-Legality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵² Bernhard Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden*, 20.

exclusive autarchy closed to any engagement with alterity. Waldenfels is emphatic about this. In an essay about the roots of Europe, he notes that

[O]ne must [...] assume that every *original institution* [Urstiftung] turns out to be a *kind of post-institution* [Nachstiftung]; more correctly: a *multiplicity of post-institutions* [...] Just like the birth of the individual, so the birth of a clan, of a people, of a culture, is an event that can never be transformed into a present and own act. A past which has never been present for me or for us only allows us to go back to it in the form of a certain *reprise* which harks back to an original *prise*, continues it without exhausting it, and is therefore subject to a constant *surprise*.⁵³

And it is precisely in this surprise, or in the always open possibility of its occurrence, that the self constantly confronts the alien who inhabits it constitutively.

Importantly, Waldenfels' insistence on the inescapable contingency of all orders⁵⁴ proves to be particularly fruitful in resisting those widespread cultural and political postures of our times which advocate the possibility of realizing an "all-encompassing world order"⁵⁵ – a possibility which we nowadays tend to dub "globalization." In fact, regardless of the attitude with which one receives globalization – be it positively, as a possible instrument of mediation between cultural differences or conflicts generated by plurality of cultures; be it negatively, as the cause of the destruction of cultural diversity – globalization is in both cases interpreted from the same perspective: in its constitutive capacity of making the world appear as a unified realm and therefore as the space in which universality and uniformity can be established through an incremental process. This understanding of globalization ignores, however, the fact that the creation of all imaginable orders entails an inevitable form of contingency.⁵⁶ For no order can truly escape its social-historical genealogy or evade the concrete fact of its institution.⁵⁷ And this means that all orders must take into account the fact that their foundation is rooted "somewhere"⁵⁸ rather than

⁵³ Ibid., 138.

⁵⁴ I further develop this point in Ferdinando G. Menga, *Ausdruck, Mitwelt, Ordnung. Zur Ursprünglichkeit einer Dimension des Politischen im Anschluss an die Philosophie des frühen Heidegger* (Paderborn: Fink, 2018), 70f.

⁵⁵ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden*, 81.

⁵⁶ This point is magnificently developed by Hans Lindahl, *Authority and the Globalisation of Inclusion and Exclusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵⁷ Cf. Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1975).

⁵⁸ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Idiome des Denkens*, 336f.

“everywhere.”⁵⁹ Consequently, their configuration can be none other than ontologically limited, despite all “totalizing”⁶⁰ claims they might raise. In other words, as a contingent process, the emergence of all order, cannot include without also excluding. It is precisely this excluded alterity which constantly threatens the stability of order as an alien element, thereby making its desire for total completion impossible and its permanent motion non-dialectizable. It is here that the claim to totality that underlies the project of globalization finds its structural limitation.⁶¹ For globalization is confronted with the fact that every total order is linked to an irreducible alterity that structurally breaks its will to absoluteness and uniformity.

For the very same reason, every order perceives its contingency and sees itself as particularly endangered when confronted with alien orders or alien configurations of life. In these cases, order does not merely engage something that can be simply defined as “Other” or as “Stranger.” Rather, by means of this experience, order discovers that strangeness dwells within itself. The encounter with the stranger can, therefore, be understood as that which pushes order toward its own constitutively contingent foundation: order does not merely perform translations from an alien outside to an own inside, but rather is itself the very product of a movement of “inner” and primordial self-translation.

3. Responsive Logic

In light of this analysis devoted to the fundamental features and modes of manifestation of strangeness, we can now return to the issue introduced heretofore: how to find a genuine possibility of an approach to the phenomenon of the alien which respects its *modus essendi*?

It has already been made clear that the predicament consists in the need to avoid betraying the alien by thematizing it even before it can have its say, on the one hand, and, on the other, respecting the alien in such a way that it must remain silent, thereby making its appearance completely impossible. As anticipated, Waldenfels’ way out is to shift from speaking *about* the alien to speaking *from* the alien.

Now, the following question emerges: is such a form of speech at all realizable? And if so, where does it take place? Waldenfels’ solution is simple yet rich in implications.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Hyperphänomene*, 32.

⁶¹ Cf. Hans Lindahl, *Authority and the Globalisation of Inclusion and Exclusion*, 224f.

His answer shows that such a form of speaking entails neither the performance of an esoteric and nostalgic “step backward” *à la* Heidegger nor the waiting for a speech to come of messianic character. Rather, this speaking from the alien is always and already happening in experience. It is happening each time we start from the claim, appeal, invocation, or request through which the alien itself comes into appearance, thereby demanding a response from us.

It follows that the place where the alien shows itself without being betrayed or distorted is the “responsive register” (*Antwortregister*) – so reads the title of one of Waldenfels’ major works.⁶² He clarifies this approach as follows, concisely and yet powerfully: “To respond is to speak from the alien.”⁶³

In looking closely at the reasons why Waldenfels considers the response as the *logos* capable of genuinely expressing the alien, one immediately engages the characters of precedence – *Vorgängigkeit* – and retroactivity – *Nachträglichkeit* – of the responsive act.⁶⁴ The precedence of a response is based on the fact that the alien has no other space of appearance than the response it evokes, yet simultaneously withdraws from the response’s grasp. In effect, the alien, so Waldenfels states, reveals itself only as “the to-what [*Worauf*] the responding” act answers.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the retroactive character of the response expresses the fact that responding “does not begin with itself, but elsewhere,”⁶⁶ namely, with the preemptive invocation of the stranger. Therefore, the response cannot configure itself as the domination of the alien. Rather, it reveals itself as a space constantly permeated by a *pathos* of the stranger.⁶⁷ Accordingly, the response, in its retroactivity, reveals an inevitable passivity characteristic of the original incursion of the alien event; this is an event which, indeed, cannot be anticipated by any theoretical or practical posture enacted by the own. At the same time, however, by virtue of its precedence, or better original supplementarity,⁶⁸ the response enables access to the otherwise inaccessible claim or invocation of the alien.

In emphasizing the pathic dimension of responding, Waldenfels asserts that “[o]nly the responsiveness to that which affects us enables the very emergence of that

⁶² Cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Antwortregister*.

⁶³ Id., *Sozialität und Alterität*, 20.

⁶⁴ Id., *Antwortregister*, 226f.

⁶⁵ Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 60.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 188.

⁶⁷ I further analyze this point in Ferdinando G. Menga, “The Experience of the Alien and the Philosophy of Response,” *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics* 13/1 (2011), 9-15.

⁶⁸ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris: PUF, 1967), 99. Waldenfels refers time and again to such a pivotal Derridian concept: see, among other passages, Bernhard Waldenfels, *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 65.

which affects us.”⁶⁹ However, unlike in Roberto Esposito’s interpretation, this does not mean that the response “anticipates and thus neutralizes” the originary strangeness it evokes.⁷⁰ To the contrary, Waldenfels’ utterance indicates that the response, although it represents the only space in which the alien can reveal itself, is characterized by a constitutive belatedness, thanks to which all responding allows only indirect access to the alien it relates to.

Waldenfels assumes the irreducible character of indirect access to the alien from Husserl’s description of the experience of strangeness as the “accessibility in its genuine inaccessibility, in the mode of incomprehensibility.”⁷¹ In *Antwortregister*, he writes:

All basic figures which can be attributed to a logic of response have an indirect character. The hiatus between claim and response, and the non-reciprocity between claim and response, would disappear if I could gain, by comparing and balancing, a foothold on both sides of the gap. Yet the diastasis between the claim and the event of a response indicates that I, as a respondent, always and already come too late and, therefore, cannot put myself at the same height of the other or draw comparisons and make a contract with it. I can only speak about an event retroactively by means of a speech [*Rede*] which is itself marked by the after-effects of a having-been-already-addressed [*Anrede*]. The alien has already rooted itself in the own long before any attempt of appropriation may begin.⁷²

As a consequence, it can be stated that originary strangeness, insofar as it is originary, cannot be anticipated by any act of direct access. What is alien manifests itself only in the aftermath of a response, such that the alien, through its claim, evokes the very response in which it can only become manifest.⁷³ In Waldenfels’ own words: “The claim only becomes [...] a claim in the response it evokes, thereby preceding the latter in an unseizable way.”⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 59.

⁷⁰ Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002), 208.

⁷¹ Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, Husserliana XIV, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 631. In similar vein see also Id., *Cartesianische Meditationen*, Husserliana I (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), 134.

⁷² Bernhard Waldenfels, *Antwortregister*, 634.

⁷³ Cf. Fabio Ciaramelli, “L’inquietante étrangeté de l’origine”, *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 96/3 (1998), 513.

⁷⁴ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 67.

Further implications follow from the original supplementarity of the response. These are clarified by Waldenfels in reference to what he defines as the essential traits inherent in the logic of response: limitedness, inevitability, asymmetry, and the creative character of the response.⁷⁵

The *limitedness* of the response indicates that, by being always belated with regard to the claim to which it reacts, it can never exhaust the strangeness to which it responds. Consequently, it can only be connoted by a constant openness and possible occurrence of further claims or responses. In this regard, Waldenfels utters:

The alien becomes what it is through nothing other than the event of responding, which implies that it can never be fully and unambiguously determined. That to which we respond always exceeds that which we give in our response.⁷⁶

One can conclude from this that where the alien appears, there too appears a demand for a response. Where a response is invoked by the alien, there, too, this response cannot exhaust the demand which triggered it. All genuine responding has its reason of being in a claim that cannot be anticipated. Accordingly, all engagement with the stranger never brings about conclusive responses, but rather remains open to further possibilities of response. Importantly, these possibilities become actual every time the demands of the alien necessarily call forth renewed confrontations and negotiations.

As to the *inevitability* of a response, this expresses the condition according to which no response can ever anticipate and, subsequently, avoid that which prompts it, namely the alien demand. As a consequence, all responding is characterized by being forced to respond as soon as it is invoked.⁷⁷ Refusing to respond is also a way of responding. Indeed, as Waldenfels perceptively puts it, “ignoring the appeal [...] already presuppose[s] a listening to the appeal.”⁷⁸

This is by no means a marginal remark, as it reveals its capital effects in those socio-political contexts in which the im/possibility for subjects to emerge into the world is precisely the result of a strategy that perpetrates or avoids silence in the face of the Other’s invocation.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Id., *Grenzen der Normalisierung*, 96ff.

⁷⁶ Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 52.

⁷⁷ Id., *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 63.

⁷⁸ Id., *Schattenrisse der Moral*, 50.

⁷⁹ Cf. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London-New York: Routledge, 2004), 19-49.

The *asymmetry* of responses is characterized by the fact that the relationship between the own and the alien cannot be “observ[ed] in advance through the eyes of a third party.”⁸⁰ Indeed, according to Waldenfels, no neutral, transcultural, or universal “point of view of the third”⁸¹ can make the own and the alien comparable, measurable, or interchangeable before a response is forthcoming.⁸² Rather, the relationship between the own and the alien arises exclusively in our own response, such that – as we know – this response is inevitably retroactive with respect to the claim of the alien itself. In light of this, asymmetry implies that the own, by having no space of mastery previous to the challenge of the alien, can never reach a symmetrical position with it.⁸³

Asymmetry displays its full relevance, especially in contexts of intercultural relationships, in which, time and again, attempts are made to render these relationships symmetrical. Such strategies are deployed, for instance, through the well-known ideological tactic of dissimulating the place of domination of the own as a neutral place of reciprocal dialogue.⁸⁴ As a result of this strategy, not only is the appeal of the alien not assumed, but it is also already eliminated, as it is forced into a predetermined and standardized space of response as determined by the sole perspective of the own.⁸⁵

Accordingly, assuming the asymmetrical character of the response has an important consequence: it forecloses the shift to an alleged third and neutral space in which alien and own would become symmetrical,⁸⁶ thereby pointing out that such a space is always and already determined by the own.

In this regard, a pivotal question nevertheless arises: How can the primacy of the own be avoided if all responding inevitably takes place from it? In fact, such a primacy registers when the own advertises itself as an alleged neutral party and when asymmetry is accounted for. To be sure, this dilemma cannot be definitively resolved. Yet, a way out of this impasse is given by the contingent practice of asymmetry,⁸⁷ such that, even though ownness cannot be eliminated, awareness thereof may help to resist the latent temptation to confuse one’s own position with one which is allegedly absolute and neutral. This awareness is more than a consolation. This awareness alone makes it possible to keep the space of intercultural dialogue fluid and porous. It allows focusing attention on the institutional contexts that are always in need of critique and

⁸⁰ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede*, 97.

⁸¹ Id., *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 66.

⁸² Cf. Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 222f.; Id., *Hyperphänomene*, 342f.

⁸³ Cf. Id., *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 66f.

⁸⁴ Cf. Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 82; Id., *Idiome des Denkens*, 333.

⁸⁵ Cf. Id., *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 112f.

⁸⁶ Cf. Id., *Idiome des Denkens*, 230.

⁸⁷ Cf. Id., *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden*, 128.

amendment. To put it otherwise: there is a big difference between a responsive stance of the self which automatically assigns a standardized and purportedly universal repertoire of responses to the alien, on the one hand, and a responsive stance of the self that, starting from the irreducible intervention of the alien's claim, remains aware of the fact that it is "not in advance the master of its own responses."⁸⁸ Thus, this responsive attitude remains in a constant state of openness, as it is triggered and renewed every time an invocation by the stranger makes itself heard.

The last characteristic of the response is its *creativity*. This is based on the fact that all responses, by being caught by surprise, and literally provoked by an unpredictable stranger's claim, are always already marked by a certain unpreparedness, calling forth the need to be inventive.⁸⁹ In light of this, the creative character of the response speaks to the impossibility of ordering processes to achieve universal and transcultural completion, such that alienness can be overcome once and for all. If such a transcultural universality existed, gathering all elements under a common denominator, the creativity of response would be superfluous. In other words, the existence of such a transculturality would coincide with a final response that could no longer be transcended. Yet, this scenario, instead of solving the problem of the relationship between the own and the stranger, would dissolve it, as every difference would collapse into a "mere variation"⁹⁰ within an already determined all-encompassing theme.⁹¹

Waldenfels' responsive approach achieves precisely the opposite result. Insofar as all human speech and action are marked with an originary alienness, there can be no "first word"⁹² nor any "last word."⁹³ In this regard, Waldenfels' comments that

[t]he first word would consist in an utterance that would start entirely from itself, without linking to others, without taking up offers or responding to claims. The last word would consist in an utterance that would end entirely with itself, without keeping open possibilities with other utterances, which would be connected with the former, thereby continuing or contradicting it.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Id., *Grenzen der Normalisierung*, 96.

⁸⁹ Cf. Id., *Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge*, ch. 7; Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 125.

⁹⁰ Id., *Hyperphänomene*, 343.

⁹¹ Cf. Id., *Topographie des Fremden*, 82.

⁹² Id., *Antwortregister*, 269.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Id., *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede*, 60.

Accordingly, if “in the beginning [...] was the response,”⁹⁵ all imaginable speech, far from being the master of its origin and end, can only refer to the fact that “we [...] are always and already in-between.”⁹⁶ We are constantly implicated in the vortex of responses, in the middle of an *entretien infini*, to put it with the title of Maurice Blanchot’s masterpiece.⁹⁷

What we experience nowadays is, in stark opposition to this *entretien infini*, the repeated attempt to find absolutizing forms of responsivity. These assume either the style of institutional discourses aimed at the construction of a global order,⁹⁸ or of neo-naturalist projects which seek, in different ways, to lead back all differences and alienness to a unitary element of the humanity of neurophysiological character.

By re-enacting in novel ways the hoary logic of an all-encompassing metaphysics, these allegedly final responses run the risk of ruining the meaningfulness of the human itself. This meaning is rooted in historical and cultural variety and the contingent character of life experiences. This is a character which does not obey the logic of a “*horror alieni*,”⁹⁹ which is constitutive of all forms of total order, but rather aspires to the preservation of difference and creative change.¹⁰⁰

If we do not keep this in mind, the conclusion we might have to face is the one that Waldenfels once expressed with great preoccupation: “To whom nothing human would be alien, the human itself would be alien.”¹⁰¹

4. Coda: A Stranger on the Threshold

If the *horror alieni* may be best seized by the image of the *wall*,¹⁰² perhaps the *threshold* is the most adequate image for picturing where a genuine dialogue with the stranger takes place and is nourished.

To close this *laudatio*, allow me to recall Waldenfels’ threshold, when, some 20 years ago, leaving his apartment in Munich after our first conversation devoted to my dissertation work, he asked me about my journey from Tübingen, and whether I had

⁹⁵ Id., *Antwortregister*, 270.

⁹⁶ Id., *Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge*, 171.

⁹⁷ Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *L’entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).

⁹⁸ Cf. Hans Lindahl, *Fault Lines of Globalization*.

⁹⁹ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge*, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Id., *Hyperphänomene*, 350.

¹⁰¹ Id., *Verfremdung der Moderne*, 8.

¹⁰² Cf. Id., *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 243.

found it difficult to reach his place. To his surprise, I responded that it had been perfectly easy to find his home, as, by chance, a friend of mine lived nearby. At that point, he was the one who *caught me by surprise*, as he immediately uttered with a smile: “*Ach, ihr Italiener, ihr habt immer einen Freund in der Nähe!* / Oh, you Italians, you always have a friend close by!”

As minute that this threshold event may appear, it has great significance: it magnificently articulates the genuine passion for dialogue and *pathos* for alterity that Bernhard Waldenfels has constantly possessed and pursued throughout his life: a philosophical as much as personal stance which I will always remember when thinking of my *entretien* with him. I would like to define it as a *Zwischenreich des Dialogs*, *letztes Wort* has by far not yet been spoken.

Sehr verehrter Herr Waldenfels, haben Sie herzlichsten Dank für Ihre Lehre und Unterstützung!