

Sensibility and the otherness of the world: Levinas and Merleau-Ponty

ABSTRACT

Sensibility has traditionally been defined as a relation with the world's exteriority. However, a certain post-husserlian phenomenology tends to reverse this definition and to redefine sensibility as an internal relation that takes place from within the world. This article focuses on this phenomenological concept of "sensibility" in Levinas and Merleau-Ponty and intends to show that this concept rests upon the presupposition of an alternative according to which we would have whether a sensible experience of identity, or an acosmic experience of otherness — *whether a wordly experience of the same or a worldless experience of otherness*. Yet, by reducing *sensibility* to the experience of the world's interiority and rejecting *otherness* beyond any worldly experience, this conception fails to account for a significant dimension of sensibility — namely, sensibility as the experience of the world's own otherness, foreignness or exteriority. It is our hope that, from the critical exposition of this alternative, will eventually appear in conclusion the significant part of this forgotten dimension of sensibility.

KEY WORDS: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, World, Flesh, *Jouissance*, Otherness.

ABBREVIATIONS

Merleau-Ponty

Œuvres, Phénoménologie de la perception, Gallimard, 2010; *Phenomenology of Perception*, Translated by Colin Smith, Routledge Classics, 2002.

Œuvres, Le visible et l'invisible, Gallimard, 2010; *The Visible and the Invisible*, Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968.

Oeuvres, "Le Philosophe et son ombre", Gallimard, 2010; "The Philosopher and His Shadow", *Signs (Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy)*, Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Levinas

Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence, Martinus Nijhoff, Kluwer Academic, 1974; *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence*, Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1981.

Œuvres III, Eros, littérature et philosophie, dir. J-L. Nancy et D. Cohen-Levinas, Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle/IMEC, 2013.

Totalité et infini, Essai sur l'extériorité, Martinus Nijhoff, Kluwer Academic, 1971; *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1969.

Introduction

Sensibility, writes Michel Henry, always means “an affection by something foreign to the power that senses it.”¹ “Sensibility” has traditionally been defined as the very relation to the world’s exteriority — namely, as the capacity of passively receiving a *supposedly* external and worldly content by means of sensations². However, this traditional conception of “sensibility” has been radically reversed by a certain post-husserlian phenomenology well represented by Levinas and Merleau-Ponty. Sensibility is reversed indeed, from the experience of the *exteriority* of the world, to the experience of its *interiority*. An experience of the interiority of the world — and of our interiority to the world — that, as we will say eventually, does not yet exhaust sensibility. This article intends to question this phenomenological concept of “sensibility” from the relation with the “world” that it implies in Levinas and Merleau-Ponty. This conception rests, according to us, upon the presupposition of an alternative, according to which we would have whether a sensible experience of identity, or an acosmic experience of otherness — *whether a worldly experience of the same or a worldless experience of otherness*. Yet, by reducing *sensibility* to the experience of the world’s interiority and rejecting *otherness* beyond any worldly experience, this conception fails to account for a significant dimension of sensibility — namely, sensibility as the experience of the world’s own otherness, foreignness or exteriority.

We will successively expose the two sides of this alternative. The first part of this study will then try to retrace one of the paths that led phenomenology to reverse the traditional conception of sensibility and to define it as an internal relation with a home-world — from Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh, to Levinas’ conception of sensibility as *jouissance*³. We will then consider the other side

¹ M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie I*, “Qu’est-ce que cela que nous appelons la vie ?”, PUF, Paris, 2003, 49.

² Kant defines sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*) as “The capacity (receptivity) for receiving representations through the mode in which I am affected by objects”, *Kants Werke, Band III: Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin 1968, 49; *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Translated by N. Kemp Smith, Boston/New-York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 65.

³ “Jouissance” is translated in English by “enjoyment” (cf. A. Lingis’s translation). However, it is our contention that this translation can be misleading. “Enjoyment” is indeed the right translation for “*plaisir*” in French. Yet, “*plaisir*” and “*jouissance*” can be both distinguished: 1- by their degree of generality — *jouissance* is a specific kind or degree of pleasure; 2- by their degree of intensity — *jouissance* expresses the highest degree of pleasure. In lack of a better solution, we decided therefore to keep using the French word. We’d like to express all our gratitude to Pr. Jeffrey Bloechl whose close reading of *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (Boston

of this alternative: The confinement of sensibility to an internal experience of the world has for consequences the rejection of any heteronomous experience beyond the limits of sensibility. If Levinas' conception of sensibility extends far beyond *jouissance* — to the wound that interrupts it in the painful relation to the other —, we will argue yet that sensibility understood by Levinas in this sense — as “suffering”, “exposition” or “vulnerability” — precisely takes place beyond the world.

It is our hope that, from the critical exposition of this alternative, will eventually appear in conclusion this forgotten dimension of sensibility — the genuine experience of the world's irreducible exteriority.

1- The Interiority of the World

Merleau-Ponty's conception of sensibility results from the refusal of the theoretical attitude supremacy, and from the attempt to free the sensible from any kind of *idealization*. This attempt can already be found in Husserl's *Krisis*, and more deeply, in the second volume of the *Ideas*, commented by Merleau-Ponty in “Le philosophe et son ombre”. Husserl claims the supremacy of the pre-theoretical attitude that naturally tends to assume the priority of the material world over the spiritual one. Yet, this pre-theoretical experience remains Husserl's “unthought-of element”⁴ (*impensé*), according to Merleau-Ponty, and Husserl continues to submit his conception of “sensibility” to the theoretical problem of knowledge — a problem that he himself defined as “the possibility of objectively valid knowledge of the transcendent.”⁵ Transcendence, to which sensible experience is supposed to access, is a problem that needs to be solved by appealing to the intentional essence of consciousness.

Heidegger in his lecture course of 1927, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, already asserts that this “pseudo-problem of transcendence” arises from a Cartesian conception of subjectivity⁶. Starting from this Cartesian presupposition, intentionality is conceived as the determination of a subject who needs to get out of himself in order to reach the transcendence of the world. In this famous text, Heidegger operates a significant reversal — from intentionality as a determination of a previous subject, to subjectivity as a determination of intentionality. It is not intentionality that should be thought from a previous conception of subjectivity, but rather subjectivity

College, 2009-2010) was the occasion for us to gain a first and deep understanding of Levinas' work, and to discover and discuss its English translations.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 1268; 1964, p.160).

⁵ E. Husserl, *Hua III/1: Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch*, ed. E. Ströker, F. Meiner, Hamburg, 1992, 228; *Ideas, General introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Translated by W. R. Boyce Gibson, Routledge Classics, London-New-York, 2012, 207.

⁶ M. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band XXIV, *Die Grundproblem der Phänomenologie*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1975, 86; *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1982, 64 (here translated as “an absurd problem of transcendence”).

that should be thought from its very intentionality — namely as “transcendence”.

Likewise, most of Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the sensible throughout his work, emerge from the rejection of the various idealizations of the world that have been erected by theoretical attitude. These idealizations always consist in conceiving the world as it is in itself, in its exteriority. There are then different paths that lead Merleau-Ponty from the *exteriority of the objective world* to the *interiority of the sensible one*, depending on which text one decides to focus on. Starting for instance from his earlier works, *La structure du comportement* and *Phénoménologie de la perception*, one can explain Merleau-Ponty’s conception of sensibility from his critique of sensation. Sensation, says Merleau-Ponty, is a concept that has been formed from the “prejudice of the world.”⁷ Not only does it presuppose the exteriority of the stimulus that causes it, but it is conceived on its model, as being both determined and isolated. To each determined and isolated quality in the world, corresponds a determined and isolated sensation. Once sensation has been unmasked as the sole product of an objectification (*objectivation*) — to which one cannot actually access in sensible experience itself —, then the sensible cannot be defined anymore as “the immediate effect of an external stimulus.”⁸

Starting from his later work — *Le visible et l’invisible* and “Le philosophe et son ombre” — one can explain Merleau-Ponty’s conception of sensibility from his twofold critique of objectivism and reflexive philosophy. Objective thought is already at play in the skeptical doubts that arise from the presupposition of the exteriority of the world. However, doubt already presupposes the very experience of truth that it is questioning — just like the presupposition of the doubtful exteriority of the world presupposes the experience of a more fundamental interiority. The suspicious exteriority of the world always already presupposes the experience of its interiority. Then, “At the same time that the doubt is renounced, one renounces the affirmation of an absolute exterior.”⁹ Our relation with the sensible world is *not* a relation of exteriority — it is not “the exterior relation between a world in itself and myself” — and reflexive philosophy is right in denying it¹⁰. But, because our relation with the world is not a relation of exteriority, it does not need either to be reduced to the interiority of thought, as it is the case in a reflexive philosophy. If our relation with the sensible world must be described in terms of an *internal relation*, it is not from the interiority of thought. Merleau-Ponty’s reversal of sensibility is not only a reversal from the exteriority of the world to its interiority, but also a reversal from the *idealist thesis* of the world’s interiority to thought, to the *perceptual assumption* of thought’s interiority to the world.

Sensibility has to be redefined therefore as an “internal relation”, namely as a fundamental

⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 677; 2002, p. 6). It is our translation. Colin Smith’s translation by “our prejudice about the world” misses the strength of the French expression.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 680; 2002, p. 9).

⁹ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 1735; 1968, p. 107).

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 1666; 1968, p. 32).

belonging of the sensible subject to the sensate. We are *of* the sensible (*nous en sommes*) and we can only perceive the world from within, as being right in the middle of it. This is from within the visible, that the visible can be seen; this is from within the tangible, that the tangible can be touched — hence the possibility for the one who sees to be seen, and for the one who touches to be touched. Hence, what Merleau-Ponty calls the essential “reversibility” of sensibility. This “reversibility” is permitted by an essential “homogeneity”¹¹ between the sensible subject and the sensible world, the perceiving subject and the world perceived. This homogeneity is not a static identity between thought and being, but a dynamic intertwining (*entremêlement*) between the sensible and the sensate — an intertwining which unfolds itself as this one and only tissue that Merleau-Ponty calls the “flesh”.

This interpretation could seem directly opposed to Michel Henry’s critique of Merleau-Ponty and occidental philosophy, as having precisely confined being to exteriority. However, while this emphasis on sensibility radically diverges from Henry’s phenomenology of life, it starts from the same, although reversed, diagnosis. As well as phenomenology left aside the problematic of the subject’s genuine interiority by claiming its transcendence, it left aside the problematic of the world’s genuine exteriority, by claiming its interiority. There is for sure in *Le visible et l’invisible*, an irreducible transcendence of the world, which precedes us and can never be fully possessed. But “transcendence” here, as we would like to argue, is not an “otherness”. In order to make such a claim, one needs to clarify the correlative equivocity of the phenomenological concepts of “exteriority” and “sensibility”, in their respective relation to “otherness”. Three senses of “exteriority” can be distinguished: (1) the naive and objective concept of “exteriority”, criticized by Merleau-Ponty and which really means “objectivity”; (2) “Exteriority” as this specific mode of sensibility in which the world can give itself, and that we eventually hope to unveil; (3) Merleau-Ponty’s own conception of “exteriority” or “transcendence”, which, as we will argue, is not synonymous of “otherness”.

Merleau-Ponty’s transcendent world is alike, made of a similar flesh. Sensibility as an “internal relation” to the world, presupposes the “flesh” as this broader kind of *interiority* — as this encompassing and unfolding intertwining that embraces the subject and the world. Flesh is “the coiling over (*enroulement*) of the visible upon the seeing body”, the coiling over “of the tangible upon the touching body.”¹² As flesh, the sensible is a “texture that returns to itself.”¹³ The very expression of “returning to itself” implies however, the experience of an “exteriority” from which one needs to return, and a proper understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the sensible, needs to take into account its constitutive negativity. As Maldiney emphasized in his article “La dimension du contact au regard du vivant et de l’existant” (1990) there is, within Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the sensible, an internal fissure — a gap which is the necessary distance, depth or differentiation that enables

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 1741; 1968, p. 114).

¹² Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 1770; 1968, p. 146).

¹³ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 1771; 1968, p. 146).

perception¹⁴. Indeed, perception is the paradoxical fact of perceiving as exterior to me, a world to which I belong. Nevertheless, this distance does not separate me from the “world”. This non-coincidence is rather immanent to the flesh as to the body itself — like when I touch my left hand with the right one¹⁵. The world or the other are no more exterior to me, than my body is to itself — as being both sensible and sensate (*sentant et senti*). Moreover, it is our contention that, while irreducible, this exteriority remains immanent to the flesh. As Maldiney wrote “the untouchable does not close the contact.”¹⁶ Even though this movement of return is infinite and can never fulfill itself in a perfect coincidence of the sensible flesh with itself, even though the identity of the flesh is indefinitely “opened” by this irreducible gap, it is never threatened by it either. This is precisely Merleau-Ponty’s argument against objective thought: Since being does not extract itself out of nothingness, it is not threatened by any lack, absence or negativity. If this lack within the sensible can never be filled, it can neither spread and risk to tear the sensible flesh of the world apart. “If there is always a ‘shift’ (*bougé*), a ‘spread’ (*écart*), between them, writes Merleau-Ponty, this is precisely because my two hands are parts of the same body.”¹⁷ It is the difference of an identity and, as Renaud Barbaras wrote, phenomenality is the “identity of difference and identity.”¹⁸ Despite the distance implied by proximity and familiarity, the sensible world is never a “foreign” one — not at least in the absolute sense of a “foreignness” which would not be relative to a prior belonging or familiarity. It is this open and flexible texture of the flesh, to which I belong and where “I can”. A world that, as we intend to show now, shares some important similarities with the levinassian world of *jouissance*.

“Sensibility is *jouissance*” writes Levinas in *Totalité et infini*¹⁹. And *jouissance* can be both understood as a *belonging* and a *possession*. This definition of sensibility first intends to return to our natural tendency to assume the world as the very condition of thought and representations. “My existence does not float in the air” writes Levinas. “My thought is here, coming from a protuberance, a head.”²⁰ Representations are conditioned by the world to which we belong. As well as vision. Like Merleau-Ponty, Levinas thinks the “environment” (*milieu*) in which every vision dwells. The “environment” (*milieu*) is what Levinas calls “earth” or, more generally, the “elemental”. And, more than the background of what is seen — like a Husserlian horizon — the elemental is the background of vision itself. The elemental supports the vision — as if my vision were supported by the very image

¹⁴ H. Maldiney, *Penser l’homme et la folie*, Editions Jérôme Million, Grenoble, 2007, 138-139.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty takes over Husserl’s example. Cf. E. Husserl, *Hua IV: Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Zweites Buch, Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, ed. W. Biemel, M. Nijhoff, Den Haag, 1952, 144-145; *Ideas II: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht/Boston/London, 1989, 163.

¹⁶ H. Maldiney, *Penser l’homme et la folie*, *op.cit.*, 139.

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 1772; 1968, p. 148).

¹⁸ R. Barbaras, *Le tournant de l’expérience : recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty*, Vrin, Paris, 1998, 150.

¹⁹ Levinas (1971, p. 144; 1969, p. 136).

²⁰ Levinas (2013, p. 163).

that I see²¹. The vision of an exteriority reveals itself to be interior to the exteriority that it sees — as if a painter saw himself getting out of his own painting²². In Merleau-Ponty's words, vision belongs itself to the visible, and stands therefore in an internal relation with the world. Now, this interiority to the world can reverse itself in an interiorization of the world. Another way to say that, in *jouissance*, the world belongs to me just as much as I belong to the world. The “environment” (*milieu*) becomes a “home” which is the first condition of any other interiorization. The world in *jouissance*, stands with me in a reciprocal relation of “interiority”. “The world and I are within one another” writes Merleau-Ponty²³. And he would agree with Levinas to say that, if the world can be possessed, it is insofar as it possesses us. In Levinas just like in Merleau-Ponty, sensibility is this movement of “coiling over” (*enroulement*) that returns to itself, embracing both the sensible subject and the sensible world²⁴. Even though it is not reduced to the reflexive interiority of thought, the exterior world seems to be nonetheless confined to this homeworld to which I belong and that I can enjoy. The exteriority of the world does not imply its otherness. “*Jouissance* reaches a world, writes Levinas, that has neither secrecy nor veritable foreignness.”²⁵

It would be too simplistic to reduce Merleau-Ponty's conception of the “sensible” to Levinas' concept of “*jouissance*”. Mainly because Levinas does not really insist on the constitutive part of negativity in sensibility, and seems to save the possibility of a radical non-coincidence for another kind of relation. Yet, this comparison enables us to enlighten by contrast this other dimension of sensibility which is not accounted for by Merleau-Ponty.

2- The exteriority to the World

We will now turn to the other side of this alternative: the rejection of any heteronomous experience beyond the limits of sensibility. To this alternative, it would be perfectly right to object that, far from being limited by Levinas to *jouissance*, sensibility in the third section of *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, precisely refers to the wound that, in the painful relation to the other, interrupts any form of *jouissance*. Sensibility writes Levinas, is an “exposure to wounding in *jouissance*.”²⁶ “Sensibility is vulnerability, the pain that interrupts *jouissance*.”²⁷ Rather than a reciprocal relation of interiorization permitted by some kind of pre-establish harmony, sensibility is the exposition to the absolute otherness of the other's exteriority. The sensible is not the dialectical union between the sensible or the sensate, but the possibility of its radical interruption. An interruption

²¹ Levinas (1971, p. 134; 1969, p. 128).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 1750; 1968, p. 123).

²⁴ Levinas (1971, p. 152; 1969, p. 143): “The movement to self in enjoyment (*jouissance*) and happiness marks the sufficiency of the I, although the image we have used of the spiral that coils over itself (*s'enroule*) does not enable us to depict also the enrootedness of this sufficiency in the insufficiency of living from...”

²⁵ Levinas (1971, p. 155; 1969, p. 145).

²⁶ Levinas (1974, p. 104; 1981, p. 64).

²⁷ Levinas (1974, p. 93; 1981, p. 55). It is our own translation here.

that is not *immanent* to this union anymore — that is not the internal negativity, necessary to any perceptive proximity — but that transcends it, as coming from outside of it. An irreparable or diachronic interruption that cannot be reintegrated to the synchronic and regenerating thread of a wider identity. Sensibility is the very interruption “of the coiling over upon itself of the sensible flesh (*de l’enroulement sur soi de la chair du sensible*)” that Levinas calls “*jouissance*”²⁸. The concepts of “proximity” and “contact” can both be found in *Le visible et l’invisible* and *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, and would deserve a more precise comparative analysis. Let’s just notice here that, while the “contact” refers in Merleau-Ponty to a quiet proximity with a similar world — a proximity that is not interrupted by the very distance that it implies — it refers in Levinas to a traumatic proximity with an absolute difference. In contact itself, writes Levinas, maybe referring to Merleau-Ponty, “the touching and the touched separate, as though the touched moved off, was always already other, did not have anything common with me.”²⁹ This contact is not an openness or a connection, but an exposure. Sensibility is nothing but this *exposure* to the diachronic rupture of Merleau-Ponty’s synchronic world, in the relation with an absolute otherness³⁰. Not a contact with the same, but a contact with the other; not the enjoyable union with the same, but the painful exposure to the other.

Yet, the otherness of the other is not part of the world anymore — it is not the otherness *of* the world. The neighbor (*le prochain*) writes Levinas “has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and the heat of the seasons. To be reduced to having recourse to me is the homelessness or strangeness of the neighbor.”³¹ A strangeness which, as it strikes and “oblige me”, appeals to my own foreignness to the world. Being wrested from *jouissance*, means being uprooted from the world; and the wounded ethical subject is not “in-the-world” (*n’est-pas-au-monde*). Nor is it in another world or in an “*arrière-monde*” — in a world beyond the world. The ethical subject is “without a world” (*sans-monde*), beyond any world whatsoever³². Only an acosmic subject can make an exception to the reign of essence, and the last section of *Autrement qu’être*, entitled “the outside”, makes it very clear that the other’s “exteriority” is an exteriority to the world.

²⁸ Levinas (1974, p. 127; 1981, p. 80): “For it is in the measure that sensibility is complacent in itself, is coiled over upon itself, is an ego, that in its benevolence for the other it remains for the other, despite itself, non-act, signification for the other and not for itself.”

²⁹ Levinas (1974, p. 137; 1981, p. 86).

³⁰ Some passages of this third section are in a direct contradiction with Merleau-Ponty’s concept of sensibility. Merleau-Ponty’s coalition of the subject and its world, writes Levinas “is enacted in the said” (1974, p. 114; 1981, p. 70) – which means that it already takes place beyond the breach/rupture that is diachronically separated from this gathering. Levinas (1974, p. 116; 1981, p. 71-72): “When not reduced, sensibility is the duality of the sensing and the sensed, a separation, and at once a union, in time, a putting of the instant out of phase, and already a retention of the separated phase. As reduced, sensibility is animated, a signification of the one for the other, a duality not assemblage of the soul and the body.”

³¹ Levinas (1974, p. 145; 1981, p. 91).

³² “*Sans-monde*”. Levinas (1974, p. 279; 1981, p. 182): “The openness of space as an openness of self without a world, without a place, Utopia, the not being walled in, inspiration to the end, even to expiration, is proximity of the other.”

Why then does Levinas claim that ethics can only occur between “beings of flesh and blood (*entre êtres de chair et de sang*)”?³³ How can a flesh and blood being be without a world? Can the flesh really mean something independently of a world of which it’s a part or an extension? This apparent contradiction could lead to different interpretations: (1) Whether there is another kind of flesh than the wordly one — some kind of divine flesh; (2) or this is from within the depth of our own sensible flesh that we can exceed it; (3) or else, there is another dimension to the “world” — a painful world beneath the synchronic world of *jouissance*. A world of flesh and blood beings that yet could support a diachronic and irreparable separation with an absolute otherness — a world whose flesh could be ripped off from itself. In any case, Levinas does not explicitly develop this other conception of the “world”. Maybe would it still imply a broader kind of unity which, prior to this separation, could survive it. But nothing prevents us to mean by the “world” this very diachronic separation, prior to any gathering. In which case, sensibility would be the originary experience of this absolute separation of the sensible flesh with itself.

In *Autrement qu’être*, sensibility is the “experience” of this absolute exteriority — at least in a traumatic and non-intentional sense of “experience”. Sensible experience — understood by Levinas in the sense of “suffering”, “exposure” and “vulnerability” — should be extended beyond our relation to a worldless other, to a modality of our experience of the world. Likewise, Levinas’ concept of an irreducible otherness should be extended to the absolute otherness of the world itself, that can be suffered in sensibility.

Conclusion

The dismantling of the phenomenological alternative upon which rests Merleau-Ponty’s and Levinas’ concept of sensibility — the alternative between a wordly experience of the same and a wordless experience of the other — enables us to unveil a significant mode of sensibility, that is, the heteronomous experience of the world’s exteriority. This conception of the sensible needs to be distinguished from a return to the way it has traditionally been defined by modern philosophy, as the exterior stimulus that affects us through corresponding sensations. The overcoming of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the sensible flesh, still presupposes it: It is the sensible flesh itself, inasmuch as it already overcomes the distinction between the subject and the world, that undergoes this irreducible separation. The experience of a diachronic diremption therefore does not separate a spiritual subject from its sensuous world, but separates the sensible from the sensuous, or the sensible flesh from itself. Likewise, this conception of sensibility presupposes Merleau-Ponty’s critique of sensations and needs to be understood, not as a purely meaningless and sensuous content, but as *a meaningful experience* of

³³ Levinas (1974, p. 119; 1981, p. 74): “Signification, the-one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood.”

the world whose *typical structure* can be explained. To the sensualist theory of atomistic sensations, we do not necessarily need to oppose Merleau-Ponty's holistic and integrative conception of sensibility. We can both reject this atomistic and dualistic conception of sensibility, and maintain that a sensible experience can "mean" in itself — *kath'auto* says Levinas — independently from the "world" understood as the totality of a contextual complex of meaning. Likewise, we can both reject the naive and objective concept of an "exteriority in itself" and think an experience of the world's "exteriority". Exteriority being nothing here but that which is experienced — another mode of our encounter with the world that needs to be taken seriously.

Apart from Levinas' conception of sensibility in the third section of *Autrement qu'être*, a phenomenological description of this specific mode of sensibility can be found in some of the founding texts of phenomenological psychopathology. Of course, phenomenological psychopathology is partly occupied with psychotic patients whose world-perceptions — in delirium or hallucinations — are the effect of a construction. One could object therefore that, being occupied with "pathological" experiences or sensibilities, phenomenological psychopathology cannot account for our "normal" ones. However it is from the standpoint of the patient's world that it intends to describe these hallucinations. "*Daseinanalyse*, writes Binswanger, is interested in the world-project of the *Dasein*."³⁴ While configured by the psychotic subject, the world does not cease to dominate him. For the patient, this is the world itself that becomes oppressive. Hence the possibility for phenomenology to start from these pathological experiences, and to enlarge them to a possible mode of phenomenality. This would amount to think the sensible from the possibility of its disruption — or, as Maldiney could have said, from the possibility of its impossibility³⁵. At least, this paradigmatic standpoint makes it clear that the world cannot be defined as the sole synchronic and dialectical unfolding of an identity. "The world — writes Binswanger, does not mean a specific totality anymore (...), it means a circumstance univocally defined by the *Dasein* as frightening, the circumstance of hostility."³⁶ And, no need to be schizophrenic to endure such an hostile and frightening exteriority. Any *traumatism*, and not necessary pathogenic ones, is the very experience of an irreducible exteriority — an exteriority that comes from the world, even though it cannot be integrated to any wider structural totality. Likewise, certain modes of affectivity like *anxiety*, *melancholia*, or *obsession*, unveil this fundamental possibility of sensibility. The world — either too close and threatening, or too far and indifferent — presents itself in its very exteriority. And what does the Freudian's concept of the uncanny (*Unheimliche*) mean, if not the diffuse impression of the irruption, within our familiar world, of such an otherness³⁷? The *uncanny* would then result from the appearance of a repressed familiarity with the world's absolute otherness.

³⁴ L. Binswanger, *Schizophrenie*, Pfullingen, Günter Neske, 1957.

³⁵ So he says about existence: "Ainsi entendons-nous saisir dans l'existence psychotique l'existential humain qui la rend possible, là même où la psychose en est une forme à l'impossible." H. Maldiney, *Penser l'homme et la folie*, op.cit., 7.

³⁶ L. Binswanger, *Schizophrenie*, op.cit.

³⁷ Cf. S. Freud, "Das Unheimliche", *Gesammelte Werke*, 12 (1947), Fischer Verlag.

Even though the further elucidation of these possibilities of sensible experience exceeds the sole purpose of this article, it requires the latter redefinition of sensibility beyond a regenerating flesh, as well as the enlargement of an irreducible otherness, to the otherness of the world itself.

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