

*A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled “Issues Confronting the Post-European World” and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.*

## Essay 29

# The Concept of Responsiveness and the Understanding of the Other



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### Abstract

In modern societies we are generally confronted with experiences of foreignness. Therefore, it is of crucial importance for us to understand our understanding of Others without neglecting obvious differences, i.e., without robbing the foreign its foreignness, and without condemning foreigners because of their Otherness. In recent years Bernhard Waldenfels has developed a so-called “responsive phenomenology” that has at its core the accentuation of the radicality of “Otherness.” Its main purposes are to demonstrate the “preceding” of the Other and to introduce a logic of responding that tries to show that the demand of the foreigner emerges as an experience of a concussion of the ownness. Providing a short overview of Waldenfels’s phenomenology, this essay addresses four questions to his conceptualization. It will be asked whether a concept of radical alterity is viable for sociology, whether we are confronted with a fundamental tension between the ideas of separation and of interconnection in Waldenfels’s phenomenology of the Other, and whether the thesis is valid, that we have to abandon the concept of reciprocity, because it overlies the asymmetries, discontinuities, and irreversibilities of social situations. Finally, it is asked whether the idea of a dialogue is adequate in the frame this type of phenomenology. This critical discussion of the central aspects of Waldenfels’s philosophy is argued from the perspective of a phenomenologically based sociology and shows the ambiguities of his conception and provides some arguments for its pragmatic revision.

### I.

Experiences of the “foreign” and of “foreignness” have been said to be the “*passé partout* of modernity.” Consequently we find a great variety of sociological

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analyses of their contours. They derive from sociology's two major classical contributions by Alfred Schütz and Georg Simmel providing clearly different approaches to the problem of the foreign: While Simmel argues primarily from the perspective of the ownness, i.e., from the society which the foreigner joins, Schütz concentrates more on the perspective of the foreigner, that is on the emigrant, who is not yet familiar with his or her new surroundings, as well as on the homecomer, who is not any more familiar with his or her former world. Current sociological contributions are more or less worsenings of these loci classici: On the one hand we find pleas for a hermeneutical sensible understanding, and, therefore, a normalization of foreignness, while on the other hand we find positions insisting on the irreconcilable difference of radical alterity (Matthes, Shimada). Seen in this light, the phenomenology of the foreign developed by Bernhard Waldenfels confronts sociologists with problems common to their disciplinary's discourse. Likewise Waldenfels describes the foreign as the "hyper-demand," as the "inaccessible," as the "extra-ordinary," as something which is "beyond" any comparison and "exalted" over any comparison (1990a: 7, 31f.; 1997: 12, 50; 1998: 16; 1999a: 185; 1999b: 9, 104, 110, 116).

Having this constellation in mind, the title of my paper is motivated by the question, whether Waldenfels's conception of a "responsive phenomenology" provides a fruitful contribution to the sociological problem of understanding others and foreign cultures. My brief statement contains two parts. In the first part I will present a very condensed overview of central aspects of Waldenfels's phenomenology. In the second one I will confront his contribution with some questions arguing from the perspective of a phenomenologically based sociology.

## II.

Waldenfels's central question is, "how or where from we can speak of the foreign, without robbing it its foreignness" (1997: 50). He accentuates the radicality of "Otherness" and each hermeneutical appropriation he identifies as a destruction of the non-availability and therefore as a conceptual revocation of what is comprehended as being foreign (1990a: 57ff.).<sup>1</sup> Thus, Waldenfels argues for a renunciation of Husserl's intentionalistic phenomenology and tries to develop a so-called "responsive phenomenology," which starts with the demand of the foreign and therefore by reflecting a difference (vgl. 1990a: 65ff., 1994: 187ff., 1997: 50ff.). With that the foreign ought to be put in its own right and its "extra-ordinarity" should be protected (1987: 173ff., 1998: 16, 1999b: 115f.). He views the foreign as being "incomparable," because its demand "withdraws from any comparison and balancing out" (1997: 13, 1999b: 171ff.). Following Waldenfels we therefore have to demonstrate the "foreign" as being something, which we cannot acquire by understanding or revoke in general

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Waldenfels 1995: 122: "Every socialization that promises reconciliation between ownness and the foreign appears as a sublime act of violence that does injustice to the foreign."

(1999b: 14, vgl. 115).

The kernel of Waldenfels's phenomenology of foreignness is to demonstrate the "preceding" of the Other. The preceding of the foreign is his starting point to reject the one-sidedness of intentionalistic, rational choice, and normativistic conceptualizations. Crucial to this "responsive phenomenology" is the idea of "responding to foreign demands," because the "experience of the foreign comes from a foreign demand, which anticipates one's own initiative" (1997: 14). According to Waldenfels, responding results "from the hearing and the perception of the demand" (1994: 614). In dealing with foreigners "a type of responsiveness gets a chance to speak, which goes beyond any intentionality and regularity of behaviour; it is a peculiar logic of responding, which leaves the foreign its distance" (1997: 52).

The "logic of responding" described by this basic concept of "responsiveness" aims at a type of responding, which in its capacity for resonance and sensitivity "moves not primarily towards something, but radiates from the other" (1998: 81). According to Waldenfels the fundamentum in re of this category of "responsiveness" is "the merging of self-reference and self-withdrawal," because "responsiveness is not restricted to the realm of verbal expressions, it penetrates the whole realm of sensory and motor activity and constitutes something like a bodily responsorium" (1998: 141, 1999a: 12; cf.: 1990a: 57ff., 1994: 312ff., 419ff., 463ff., 2000: 365ff.).<sup>2</sup>

It is of crucial importance for Waldenfels to develop an understanding of the experience of foreignness, that exceeds a purely additive conception of an "increase of experiences" and turns over into "a becoming foreign of experience as well as a becoming foreign of oneself" (1997: 10; 1999a: 199). The immanent self-reference of any reference to the foreign is interpreted as an structurally inevitable change of the experiencing self. The demand of the foreigner emerges as an experience of a concussion of the ownness, an understanding of responsiveness is presented to give those answers/responses to the foreign, which are not available to the ownness (1987: 173ff.). Waldenfels calls this the "paradox of a creative reply, in which we give what we don't have." And he continues: "The occurrence of responding defines itself not through the speakers I, but this I is, on the contrary, defined by the responding as a respondent" (1997: 53, vgl. 1998: 11). Accordingly, we are "as bodily beings ... more than what we are by oneself and by our own intentions" (1998: 11). Crucial, for this access, is, therefore, a radicalization, i.e., an intensification as well as a defusion of the relation between ownness and foreignness insofar as the dialectical folding of both relata becomes the focus of the analysis (vgl. 1997: 66ff., 1999a: 33ff., 2000: 265ff., 1994: 202ff.). The central category to describe this to-each-other as a with-each-other is the concept of "crossing" or "folding" (1999b: 97).

Furthermore, it is crucial for Waldenfels to reach an understanding of the foreign "from foreign places," as an "elsewhere" and as "extra-ordinary" (1997: 10, 12, 20).

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<sup>2</sup> The old German term "respondieren," original from the Latin, shares the connotations of "antworten" (to answer, to reply), "entsprechen" (to correspond to, to be in accordance with, to fit, to come up to) and "widerlegen" (to refute, to disprove).

Due to this dominance of thinking from foreign places (vgl. 1997: 12, 26, 184ff.) his reflections are permeated by a spatial imagery: Especially the figures of border, threshold, in between, and intermediate sphere are generally present in his studies.

### III.

I have to stop my overview of Waldenfels's phenomenology at this point in order to introduce at least a few questions:

My first question is whether a concept of radical alterity, of the radically foreign is viable for sociology. If "the concern with the foreign is the starting point" (1997: 51), we immediately have to ask, who is the subject of this concern. The idea of "pure" responsivity cannot serve as a guideline here, because such an understanding would remain completely non-committal and therefore could not meet the demand in question. Being-directed and being confronted with a demand we only find from and for someone, i. e., not absolutely, but only for concrete others: Each demand is always a concrete demand, which brings the structure of Being-requested-to-respond to someone. There is no "demand as such," but always something which someone interprets as a demand on him- or herself. Responsiveness as a merely "pure" attitude lacks a pragmatic dimension, which for the first time puts us in the position to understand a demand as such and to meet it. A concrete understanding of responsivity consequently has to be conceptualized as the sensibility of hearing or of taking notice of concrete demands. And this hearing inevitably presupposes an understanding of Being-directed.

A conception of the "radical foreign" is therefore not viable from a sociological point of view. Because recognizing an irreconcilable difference obviously has to be seen as an understanding of the non-understanding of the Other. It is this second-order understanding which leads to the idea of the principal and irreconcilable radicality of foreignness *ad absurdum*. While being defined as "foreign" this foreign loses its character of being "extra-ordinary," because its foreignness is only in relation to a certain, actually relevant order. Thus, responsivity most likely should be understood as an attitude as well as a request to keep the range of opportunities "to respond to" and "to understand the foreign demand" open as long as possible.

In the second place, I want to ask whether we are confronted with a fundamental tension between the ideas of a "separation (Levinas)" and an "interconnection (Husserl, Elias, Merleau-Ponty)" or "fold/crossing over (Plessner, Simmel)" in Waldenfels's phenomenology? In my view, the categories "crossing over," "interconnection," or "entanglement" (Schapp), as metaphorical as they are, are obviously in contrast to Waldenfels's emphasis on the radical Otherness of the foreigner as something "extra-ordinary." His changing reference to the ideas of the "in between" and the one of "separation"<sup>3</sup> in describing the Others as "radically foreign" therefore results in a

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Waldenfels 1995: 115: "The foreign is not only distinct from ownness, but cut off from it."

ambiguous phenomenal description. If we refrain from calling this a systematic inconsistency, we are at least confronted with a conceptual tension to be clarified and solved. It is not only in this context that the problems of Waldenfels's refusal of the model of concentric circles become noticeable, a "revision" for which he argues (1999b: 15). He fails to differentiate between the legitimate limitation of its scope of validity and a discharge of its principal relevance for the understanding of human experiences. Systematically seen, these observations lead to a two-stage reflection, which does not short-circuit phenomenal descriptions with demands of validity. Not every concept of an intermediate sphere runs counter to each idea of centrality. What is required is rather an explication of this "in between," which sheds some light on its internal centrality.

My third question is whether Waldenfels's thesis is valid, that we have to abandon the concept of reciprocity? A philosophical thesis like Waldenfels's which rejects sociology's starting point, i. e., the constitutive character of the structure of reciprocity (the general thesis of the alter ego), can always raise disciplinary's attention. According to Waldenfels, this "law of the social economy of words" (1994: 167) overlies the asymmetries, discontinuities, and irreversibilities of social situations. He, therefore, pleads on the contrary for the idea of a fundamental "irreciprocity of relationship" as the point of departure (1994: 335). But it does not become clear to what extent the outbidding or abandonment of a thinking deriving from structures of reciprocity follows from the conception of a "responsive phenomenology." This counts at least in the case that one does not narrow the concept of structures of reciprocity to the ideas of intimateness or consensus, as Waldenfels obviously does with the category "reciprocity of perspectives." The "request of the foreigner" is not simply "there," rather it is nestling among situations of experiencing, acting, and interacting, in which the foreigner behaves correspondingly to his or her own cultural patterns. Insofar this request of the foreigner creates not only sense, but it has –contrary to Waldenfels's basic assumption (1997: 52)– always also sense itself and follows implicitly certain rules. For what happens in interpreting any experience as "foreign" is its preliminary determination. Just as paying attention to a "foreign demand" always acknowledges this demand as meaning-structured. Furthermore, the constitutive openness of these determinations is not specific to experiences of foreignness, but a structural phenomenon of every attempt at an interpretation. For it is not until the responding that the process of generating sense is closed; it is the interconnection of demand and response which at first realizes the sense, i. e., the meaning of the former as well of the latter. This is common to sociologists at least since the works of Mead and Plessner. If this consideration is applicable, the so-called preceding of the foreign would be circumvented and sociology's beginning with structures of reciprocity renewed.

Furthermore, actors are not merely defenceless, spineless, or desorientated "at the mercy of a foreign demand" (1998: 81). At this point Waldenfels's considerations appear to be somewhat fatalistic, what seems to be due to his distinctive orientation to the philosophy of Levinas. It is also conspicuous, that in Waldenfels's studies we regularly find remarks that cannot be understood without the implicit insinuation of structures of reciprocity. For example, if he says, that "the responding to the foreign

appears to be a double event, the self occupies a part in like Others,” in fact “in a way, that I start with the demand of the Other” (1997: 30). The same holds for the comment, introducing the foreign as an “extra-ordinary,” “which gives our world a different light, a different pitch” (1999a: 185). As it is with the glance people direct to themselves and to others, which is always a glance being formed by others. It follows that the logic of responsiveness and the concept of structures of reciprocity do not mutually exclude each other, and we are therefore confronted with the further question, if a position beyond intentionality (“I”) and communication (“We”), i. e., a position placing responsiveness (“Thou”) in its center, shows specific reflections in sociology.

What can sociology learn from a phenomenology of responding, by reflecting on the structure of responding? Principally, sociology finds its basic assumption confirmed, that for its analytical purpose interactive constellations are of constitutive importance. Furthermore, the discipline receives a lot of evidence by Waldenfels’s detailed descriptions and subtle observations in order to achieve a revised version of the classical conception of subjectivity: primarily there are not subjectivity (intentions) or transsubjectivity (objectivated orders), but inter-subjectivity with the demands resulting out of that: “By insisting on the responsive difference between the What and the On what of a response an intermediate sphere will be revitalized, which gains its rights neither in subjective intentions nor in transsubjective coordinations” (1994: 332).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the pragmatics of the “in between” returns to sociology’s conceptual center. As with earlier wordings, in consequence of which this “logic of responding” essentially focusses on the idea of an “open correspondence” between foreignness and ownness (1987: 177f.), Waldenfels here takes up genuine impulses of sociological thinking. For it is this accentuation of sociology’s basic assumption, that social orders are to be understood as a process, which takes place through the continuing pragmatic coping with the tensions between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary (Max Weber), finding its social expression in the continuing production and reproduction, innovation and revision of normalizations (typifications). Facing things this way we realize that this is a matter having to do not only with foreigners but –more generally– with Others in general.

In the fourth place, I want to ask if the idea of a dialogue is adequate in the frame of a “responsive phenomenology”? Using the figure of “indirect speech” (1999b: 9ff., 150f., 158f.) Waldenfels intends a representation of the foreign, which “introduces it, without incorporating it” (1999b: 12). But this reference to the classic-philosophical topos of “indirect speech” is not able to solve the underlying problem here. Instead, it seems to be an expression of the impossibility to represent as such something experienced in other conditions. Moreover, the simultaneous reference to the pictures of indirect speech and dialogue obviously contains fractures. This can be best documented by Waldenfels’s own differentiation between the “performative-symmetric” relation of partners in dialogue and the “performative-asymmetric” relation between foreigners

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Waldenfels 1995: 121: “How I should answer, or what I give as an answer, depends on me; whether I answer does not depend on me.”

(1999b: 14). Insofar it remains unclear, if and how this latter type of relationship can be reconciled with reference to the model of dialogue elsewhere carried out.

#### IV.

Thus, it might be an immediate reflection of Waldenfels's preference for concepts signaling fragility –as “twilight,” “thorn,” “penetration”– that the stimulation of his thinking for sociology remains indistinct and vague. Maybe this is typical for a philosophy prescribing itself to the leitmotif of hanging-in-the-balance. This type of thinking finds a paradigmatical expression in the title of one of Waldenfels's books: *Because Order in the Twilight* (1996) can be understood as a problematization of orders as well as an attempt to create order even in most opaque areas.

Finally, there might be a way leading out of this dilemma by looking at the two cases Simmel described as a dialectical fold of proximity and detachment, which differentiate the alienation of persons previously close to each other and the encounter with foreigners face-to-face: On the one hand, “the close is distant,” on the other hand “the distant is close.” The same holds for ongoing processes of functional differentiation through which “the non-functional neighbour to an increasing degree becomes distant, while the functioning foreigner becomes close” (1999b: 99). Descriptions like these lead to a pragmatic turn for an access to the foreigner: Otherness then receives a cultural (socio-moral) determination as foreignness, if this expression of social non-affiliation becomes pragmatically relevant (vgl. 1999b: 101). Accordingly, it would be “borders of ability” (1999b: 105), i.e., inhibitions or hinderings of one's own capacity to act on the basis of experiences of the undecidable or the uncertain, that are mediated by experiences of foreignness and that generate “the experience of the impossibility of one's own possibilities” (1999b: 110f.). Such a pragmatical understanding of the phenomenon in question probably could negotiate some of the obstacles in question.

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