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Emergence of Exteriority in Levinas' Sense in Analytic Philosophy

Introduction

Analytic philosophy has little use for exteriority. It was born with the idea that there existed a real, which was unveiled in phenomena, and that the major adventure of humanity was to forge a true theory of this reality. The essential stake of philosophy then becomes to master the way in which the truth of the world is given and can be expressed in linguistic signs.

When analytic philosophy goes to work, language is supposed to be already there, already publicly available and shared, and needs only to be reformed and mastered in its semantic limits, or regimented in logic, to adapt it to the adventure of knowledge.

The object of this talk is to present to you a moment, which I believe to be essential, of the young history of analytic philosophy. A moment where exteriority, in a sense close to Levinas', imposes itself where we expect it least: in an approach that presents itself as naturalist, that of Quine and the post-analytic philosophy that has followed, and which still constitutes an essential part of current analytic philosophy. Exteriority appeared in this context as a scandal, a formidable threat to the project of truth embodied by science, a kind of vertigo. But this scandal is not our focus here. Our focus is to suggest a Levinasian interpretation of this emergence.

The thought of Levinas is a Justice Project, rooted in the Otherwise than being and its original dual cell, The Other and the same, but which must meet the concrete reality in being. Levinassian sense of Humanity must turn into a social project. Our Levinasian interpretation of Quine should raise a double question: that of the empirical possibility of this social project of Justice, and reciprocally that of the sense of theoretical knowledge when rooted in the Otherwise than being.

Context of the emergence of analytic exteriority

When Quine began work, at Harvard in the '30s and '40s, there were two dominant paradigms of meaning or signification. 'Signification' is to be understood here as the form of the link between language and that of which it speaks.

A model-theoretic paradigm, stemming from the work of Frege, the early Wittgenstein and Tarski, and a logical-empiricist paradigm, developed by Schlick and Carnap.

The first paradigm sees language as a structured set of signs faced with a world conceived as a structured set of objects. In this paradigm, the signs designate and label objects and sets of objects, and sentences picture the structures of objects and sets of objects. To say, for example, that *S is P*, is to say that the object designated by S belongs to a set of objects designated by P. The world is conceived as *a priori* organized into sets of already individualized objects, and the structure of language parallels the ontological structure of the world. *The right* grammar must reflect the *true* form of the world.

The second, the logical empiricist paradigm, considers that the world is not given as a set of individuated objects but as sense perception. The signification of sentences resides in the sense perceptions that they affirm, using objects which are without ontological pretension but have a solely scientific function, that of effectively expressing sense perceptions. To say that the table is brown is not to say that the object table is an element in a set of brown objects, but it is to say that there is a visual perception of a table that generates the sensation of brown when we have the experience.

Though both of these paradigms of linguistic signification raise significant technical difficulties, each does offer a coherent response to the question of how language latches on to the world in order to claim to say the world as it is, to say it in its truth, grand project of analytic philosophy. Language is structured in conformity with the ontological structure of the world for one. Language is reducible to the expression of the sense experience we can have of the world for the other. Since ontology is the same for everyone or since sense experience is the same for everyone, language refers to the world, the same world, and language merely reflects the experience that each of us has of the world. We are not far from Aristotle (*On Interpretation*), plus the logical sophistication. In these paradigms, no exteriority is envisioned; language can only reflect *the* world which is *my* world, the one I experience through my senses.

Quine will show both these paradigms to be unacceptable, and propose a new one.

The first paradigm, which contends that a sentence refers to a set theory fact, is rejected in the name of empiricism. The world is not given as a world of structured objects but as sensations. It is language which organizes these sensations. It is via an already theoretical perspective on the world, therefore via language, that these sensations become affirmations about objects. Objects cannot precede language in order to make it meaningful.

The second paradigm presents an insurmountable linguistic difficulty. This difficulty is the following: sense perception of the world does not determine the meaning of sentences. It is impossible to reduce the sentences of language to their purely phenomenal translation. It is in arguing this, and in the alternative model that Quine proposes, that exteriority will emerge in analytical reason.

Emergence of exteriority

The fundamental idea of this argument is the following. We must distinguish two types of sentences. So-called observational sentences find their signification directly in a series of possible sense experiences of the world. For example, *here is a rabbit*, or *this is white*. But the same does not go for so-called theoretical sentences, which constitute the overwhelming majority of sentences. These sentences, considered in isolation, have no directly empirical worldly signification. Thus, for example a sentence such as *my dog has rabies*, or *there is copper in it*, or especially *a neutron has no electric charge*.

To what experience of the world does the sentence *my dog has rabies* refer? To the seeing of a dog's behavior close to what we know of the symptoms of rabies? But how do we know these symptoms? We have learned them by verbal descriptions. Which themselves refer to other verbal descriptions. To make the link between such sentences and sense perceptions of the world, we need to make inferences, use other sentences, themselves linked to other sentences, and so on, to arrive at observational sentences, that is, sentences whose signification resides directly in a set of sense perceptions. In a culture without any medicine, *my dog has rabies* has no translation for instance.

Thus the signification of a theoretical sentence such as *my dog has rabies*, cannot reside directly in a series of sense experiences of the world but only via a very complex network of interconnected sentences which make the link between this theoretical sentence and observational sentences. The situation is even more radical for a sentence about neutrons, whose understandability supposes knowledge of a good part of contemporary theoretical physics.

A descriptive sentence is supposed to have a meaning and being true or false in virtue of a phenomenal reality in the world. But Quine shows us that, apart from observational sentences, a sentence precisely does not directly latch onto the phenomenal reality. It is only via a whole ensemble of interconnected sentences. Therefore a sentence is never true or false in isolation, any more than it has signification in isolation. It is the whole block of interconnected sentences which, jointly, is articulated with the world and reveals itself to be meaningful and to be true or false. An isolated sentence has neither signification nor truth value. It only has these qualities jointly with its block of interconnected sentences.

Thus for example the sentence *marriage is a union between a man and a woman* has become false, because its signification depends on its connections with sentences which legislate marriage, and these interconnections between the sentences have changed.

Now let us consider the Other [*Autrui*] and me, speaking different languages. When the Other says to me a sentence, in general a theoretical one, understanding it amounts not to grasping its empirical signification in the world, since in general there isn't one, but to grasping its complex ties to other sentences and ultimately to mastering its truth content in terms of possible experiences of the world via this network of other sentences. Understanding what the Other says to me does not amount to determining a worldly signification of his or her sentence, but to finding a sentence in my language which is isomorphic to that one, that is, a sentence which plays the same role in the complex structure of interconnected sentences which constitute my language. To understand is to translate in this shifted sense: find a sentence not with the same worldly signification, but with the same role in my linguistic system of interconnected sentences.

Quine's claim is then the following: this translation of the sentence of the Other in my language is indeterminate. Multiple different translations are possible, that is, compatible with a perfectly sensible dialogue with him.

The basic reason of this claim is simple. The signification of the theoretical sentences is no longer guaranteed by experience of the world, which is publicly shared. The connections between sentences, which constitute the signification of these sentences, is constructed in each person's interiority, confronted with the experience of the world and the verbal behavior of those who teach us language every day. At a certain point, each person's linguistic apparatus is so complex, the signification of the sentences used every day depends so much on other sentences, that it is largely under-determined by the fact that dialogue with Others seems intelligible.

My linguistic apparatus is determined by the history of my learning of language, during which countless connections between sentences have stabilized. My neighbor across the hall has a learning experience that resembles mine, but is not identical with it. A person who lives in a society very different from mine had a learning experience very different from mine. There is no reason to suppose that when he addresses me there will be a sentence in my language situated isomorphically to the sentence in his language, with the same connections with other sentences, themselves isomorphic to his, that is, having the same connections...

Quine calls this internal structure of the linguistic apparatus, this structure of countless and incredibly complex interconnections between sentences whose stabilization constitutes linguistic competence, a conceptual scheme. A conceptual scheme is the result of a culture, of a historical situation, of a set of beliefs shared in a community, and of individual history of language learning. The signification of sentences is not to be secured [*gagée*] in sense experience, and only partially secured by shared social practices. Signification is secured in the world to which we accede via a culture and an individual history.

Is this epistemic exteriority a levinassian exteriority ?

Let us now return to the Other who says to me some sentences in a language from a more or less different culture. These sentences must be understood as they demand to be.
What can I do to receive these sentences properly?

I can attempt to find sentences as isomorphic as possible to the Other's, in my language. But my conceptual categories and my linguistic structure are different. I can only project the Other's sentences onto my conceptual scheme. The Other's sentences are no longer his sentences but mines imitating his. The sentence of the Other, received by me, is no longer his sentence, since his sentence is only his sentence in his conceptual context, and is no longer his sentence once repatriated into my conceptual scheme. I will for example try to translate one of his words by marriage, and I will try to adjust the signification of the word to be compatible with what I understand of his sentences, without ever being able to hope to find a term or an expression that plays exactly the same role.

Quine's thesis and paradigm of signification claim therefore that I cannot receive the Other's sentence as his sentence. The Other cannot teach me a world. He cannot offer me, in his language, a common world. As soon as the signification is no longer secured by a shared world, sharing a world is only the approximate privilege of an intimate "between us" society.

From the analytic point of view, such a model of language is a cataclysm. To say that signification and therefore truth is relative to a culture that gives them, to a historical context, is to say that the true and the good are relative to a historico-cultural situation. The scientific project threatens to be reduced to a cultural project among others, and to fall from its pedestal as humanity's grand adventure. But this scandal is not our focus here. Our focus is to suggest a Levinasian way of understanding this new signification paradigm.

At first glance, and contrary to what I have announced, Quine's thesis, no doubt one of the most groundbreaking theses produced within analytic philosophy, simply denies exteriority. It denies it since the Other's sentence becomes my sentence as soon as I have received it. The Other is immediately betrayed by his sentence, is absent from it, as soon as I have received it. But in fact this would be a misreading of Quine.

Quine claims that the original signification of the Other's sentence escapes me, but that does not prevent me, by the abstract reasoning Quine produces, from knowing that this signification escapes me. In bringing to light the idea of a multiplicity of conceptual schemes exterior to each other, Quine teaches us an analytic equivalent of the idea of infinity.

I have the idea of a conceptual scheme alternative to my own, of which I can know nothing since all knowledge formulated by me presupposes and is based on my conceptual scheme which is not his. The very idea of a conceptual scheme is therefore the idea of a possible universe of significations alternative to mine, foreign, of whose content I have no possible idea. It is therefore an idea whose unique content is to be beyond my world. The idea of infinity.

Analytic reason has struggled fiercely against this idea. In particular Davidson, in a famous article entitled "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", would refute this notion by exhibiting its *self*-refuting nature. For Davidson, the very idea of a conceptual scheme rests on the possibility of having a transversal and encompassing view of all the schemes. In order to think of my conceptual scheme as a possible scheme among others and not as The true scheme, I must think of the series of possible schemes panoramically. Yet the very idea of a scheme is to claim that from within my scheme I do not see the other schemes. To speak of alternative schemes is to speak as if I had left my own conceptual scheme, which the very notion of a scheme denies is possible.

But Quine, as Levinas, is not bothered by this line of argument. He does not indeed have the least idea of the content of an alternative scheme. But he conceives of its necessary possibility. He has the idea of what he has no idea. He has the idea of an exteriority. And each of his readers with him. Quine's thesis offers a glimmer of an authentic exteriority, a universe of significations which is and remains other, exterior, with which I can enter into linguistic relation without making my own.

The exteriority affirmed by Quine provoked a huge internal shift in analytic philosophy, but for a reader or a philosopher who discovers this analytic exteriority with the respect it deserves, but also with a regard imbued with Levinasian philosophy, two delicate questions emerge.

If we grant Quine his thesis, the Other and his language, in general, do not teach. The Other is indeed exterior, so that he turns out to be incapable of sharing a world with me. But how can we hope to think a social project of Justice without sharing any signification? Must we conclude that the Levinasian third party question (la question du tiers) is condemned to remain abstract? Or perhaps must we deduce with Rorty that this project is limited to the Other within the limits of a cultural intimate "between us" society mentioned by Levinas in the article "Le moi et la Totalité", giving up the social Justice Project?

Reciprocally, Quine's exteriority remains epistemic and not ethic. His problem is that of the ambiguity of the being, and not that of being dedicated to the Other. Among the two emblematic pictures of the metaphysical relationships, teaching and assistance, the latter is totally absent. With Quine, I do not desire the Other, but I desire the possible theory of the world that the Other has developed and to which I do not have access.

Does it mean that our bridge between Quine and Levinas is irrelevant because the ethical reversal of Levinas is far from the theoretical purposes of Quine?

My answer is that I can introduce a Levinasian reading of Quine's discovery, without wondering if Quine would follow me (which is out of our question). In this reading, his exteriority is not only an epistemic muteness or an ambiguity of the being, but also a possibility of escaping, Otherwise than being, rooted in the desire of the significations of the Other. It might alter something in the thesis of Quine, and it might alter the signification of the general idea of theory. This is the next and last questions we are going to deal with.

Rooting the general idea of theory in the Otherwise than being

We can introduce this levinassian reading with the first text of *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, "La signification et le sens"[1], where Levinas seems to adopt a line of questioning very close to Quine's, about the heterogeneity and the historicity of signification. Levinas opposes "the contemporary philosophy of signification"[2], which encompasses notably Hegel, Bergson, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, to Plato and his quest for the universality of signification.[3]

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[1]Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Fata Morgana, 1972; trans. by Nidra Poller, *Humanism of the Other*, Champaign (Ill.), University of Illinois, 2003.

[2]Ibid, p. 30; trans. p. 18, for example.

[3]Let us remark in passing that on Plato's side, Levinas allusively evokes the contemporary logical positivists, that is, the focal point [*foyer*] of the original analytic thought against which Quine developed his theses. Cf. p. 18; trans. p. 10.

In Plato, the world of significations precedes the language and culture that express it. There exists in an ideal reality, significations to be discovered and expressed in language. These significations are not the fruit of a historical and cultural context, they do not emerge from such a context, but exist absolutely. Knowledge, rationality, truth are not emanations of a culture, which would only have signification within that culture, but rather a sort of archi-culture. Philosophy and science are its pillars and should allow us to grasp the world in its objective reality. The early analytic philosophy, with Frege and Carnap, remains close to this idea with the hypothesis than the shared world is the universal basis of the significations.

But in the so-called contemporary philosophy of signification, which Quine embraces, signification appears as something much more complex. It is not an intelligible reality that human intelligence, raised in the archi-culture of rationality, could discover in its truth. Language does not aim at a signification that precedes it. Signification is born in language, in the culture in which that language soaks. Signification is situated culturally and historically.

The parallel between, on the one hand, the so-called contemporary philosophy opposing Plato and, on the other, Quine opposing traditional analytic philosophy is perfect. It is as if Quine were the passer of the idea the historicity of signification to analytic philosophy which had remained Platonic on that point. An authentically analytic passer because, for him, historicity emerges as a logical consequence of the analytic idea of signification.[4]

What Quine calls the indeterminacy of translation is expressed by Levinas by saying that different cultures cannot interpenetrate each other or interexpress each other as if they were each translations of a universe of ideal significations.[5]

This parallel between the two perfectly contemporary philosophers diverges, however, in the use they make of this idea of historicity. For Quine, this idea upsets the notion of truth and the foundations of epistemology, which must then be reconstructed. For Quine's heirs, it is the idea of rationality, including in its ethical and political dimension, which must be reconstructed (Putnam) or which on the contrary must be relativized (Rorty).
But in Levinas, once there is no archi-culture or archi-rationality, the question is not that of the universality of rationality but that of a sense [*sens*] which could precede and orient all cultures without depending on any of them. This orientation would of course be ethical, not epistemic.

4If we include Peirce in the analytic tradition, then we should rather say that Quine rediscovers historicity for an analytic philosophy which had forgotten it. For Peirce, indeed,the historicity of signification is an obvious fact.

5Ibid., p. 39; trans. p. 23.

Let us take an example that seems to me of central importance because it appears in both philosophers thought.

Quine envisions the possibility for a European to learn, for example, Chinese, and thus to penetrate Chinese culture and significations. But this possibility changes nothing for his thesis. For the indeterminacy of translation between cultures remains, even if it becomes internal to a person. An authentic bilingual, bi-cultural Brittish-Chinese person could never propose a unique, absolutely valid translation that would express one and the same signification in both languages. The cultures remain non inter-penetrable even if a person is bi-cultural. For Quine, the essential part of his thesis is thus preserved: the real cannot determine [*gager*] significations. They remain historically situated. The being remains ambiguous.

Levinas envisions the same situation very differently.[6] Faced with a French person who becomes bicultural, the question is not whether, consequently, the interpenetration of two cultures that occurs also implies the universality of signification. The question is: what is the orientation that pushes this French person to make such an effort rather than declare the foreign language barbarous? This orientation is ethical, Otherwise than being.
The metaphysical relationship is back!
Is Quine's theory necessarily absent from this very levinasian problematic? In my reading, it is not. What is the orientation that pushes the so-called contemporary philosophers, and Quine, to take such an interest in the heterogeneity of significations? Why the theoretical ambiguity of the being is such a huge and central question for them? Why are we so reluctant to follow Rorty and why Putnam or Davidson tried so heavily to save a sort of universality? Is this ambiguity of being which is so important by itself, or is the ethical desire of the Other, expressed by the hope in a common social project of Justice, which is the true origin of the question? Do you really think that being condemned to never understand the Other beyond the intimate between us society is such a nightmare only for epistemic reasons? Can't we see here the original Levinassian idea of escaping from myself?

Behind the multiplicity of historically and culturally situated significations, Levinas is looking for a universal sense [*sens*], a universal orientation, which is the desire of the Other's teaching in order to share a world with him. Is not Quine's incredible discovery that the Other's teaching can be taught to me, but only via the slow penetration of his conceptual scheme, and that this teaching would evaporate if I inflicted on it the violence of making it mine, of projecting it into my conceptual scheme, in trying to translate it?

6See Ibid., p. 39; trans. p. 23.

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The indeterminacy of translation that Quine discovered might be received as expressing that the desire of sharing a world suppose to receive the teaching of the Other with the huge effort of learning, as opposed to the temptation of translating, which is just bringing back to myself. A message of epistemic humility that we can read as a fundamentally ethical message.

Conclusion

We now have the response to our two questions.

With Levinas, an epistemic reading of the discovery of Quine is not our last word. Because our ultimate adventure is not that of a theoretical mastering of the world, but that of our Justice Project. The project of a true theory of the world is devoted to that of social Justice. Being worried and appealed by the question of epistemic historicity and cultural relativity, as Quine and his heirs are, might be understood with a levinassian signification.

The translation is indeterminate because the significations are not secured by the being, which is ambiguous. But the radical teaching of the Other is still possible, through the slow way of learning without translating, learning by a slow penetration of his conceptual scheme. If the Other were in my scheme, he could not teach me anything that I do not virtually already know. It is because the Other is not in my scheme, and that it is possible for me to discover his scheme through a long effort, that the Other can teach me. And that I can escape from myself. This is also Quine's lesson. This orientation is possible because it is rooted in the ethical desire to share a world. This is Levinas' lesson, which can even enlighten our understanding of Quine's theoretical path.

With this Levinas' lesson, I can see that before even teaching me his world, the Other teaches me that my conceptual scheme does not exhaust the truth of the world. Through the discovery of the other in his exteriority, through the paradoxical discovery of epistemic exteriority that Quine proposes and that Davidson sees as contradictory, the Other teaches me to look critically and humbly on my own theory of the world. The other teaches me the possibility of the epistemic exile.[7] As Levinas puts it, Quine's exteriority teaches me to "surprise in the depths of the self [*Moi*], in short, an unambiguous sincerity and a servant's humility."[8]

7Exile, according to Sandra Laugier, is impossible. But this is true only if we consider that learning a second language is not an exile but a split. Now, from a Levinassian perspective, it is indeed an exile, and an exile of no return because the translation between my two languages will be indeterminate and therefore I will never be able to bring the Chinese signification back to my idiolectal signification.

8Ibid., p. 56; trans. p. 35 (modified)

The consequences of Quine's thesis are thus modified when rooted in the Otherwise than being. They acquire a positive dimension. The indeterminacy of translation is no longer solely a thesis on the ambiguity of being in the face of theoretical effort, a purely impersonal description of the thesis. It is a positive affirmation of epistemic exteriority which becomes trace of the desired and invitation to call into question the omnipotence of our theoretical reading of the world, whose concretization is the learning [*apprentissage*] of other cultures without the will to translate, that is, to reduce to the same. The ambiguity of being is no longer a scandal, but an invitation to be worried. When knowledge is devoted to Justice, the ambiguity of being unveiled by Quine is a call for metaphysical desire.