

Summary of PhD dissertation

EXPRESSION

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The aim of the dissertation

The aim of the dissertation is to describe the experience of expression by using the method of phenomenology and ordinary language philosophy. Built on the basis of the analysis of Emmanuel Lévinas and Stanley Cavell, and inspired by, but not following their exposition in every step, the dissertation seeks to describe how an action becomes an expression, what are its conditions of possibility and its consequences in the fields of intersubjectivity, body, time and consciousness. The dissertation consists of two parts: it starts with a textual analysis, followed by the description itself, which can also be read independently.

The methods

The first part consists largely of the analysis of the two major works of Emmanuel Lévinas. It establishes the significance of the notion of expression in Lévinas's philosophy – something that is rarely noted by commentators and often just mentioned in passing, as if we all knew what the meaning of expression was. Then I proceed to analyze the meaning of Lévinasian expression as it is developed in his two major works, and look at the internal contradictions and limitations of his descriptions.

In *Totality and Infinity*, the problem of the analysis is that while expression has a central role in the text, Lévinas does not give a concise description, but returns to the theme again and again. There are some contradictions, and some consequences of his analysis are left unclear. In *Otherwise Than Being*, there are not even fragments of what we could call descriptions, so we need a thread to read this text looking for the meaning of expression: an analysis that is inspired by the book, but nonetheless can be stated independently of it.

The second part of the dissertation is inspired by Lévinas and Cavell, but it can be read independently of their work. Its main method is the phenomenological description of experience based on numerous examples; in this description, the methods of ordinary language philosophy (as interpreted by Stanley Cavell) are also used. For example, it is a methodological principle of the latter that if we pose questions about an ordinary situation that are not posed in this situation itself, then we distort precisely its ordinariness, its being “normal and average”. On the other hand, phenomenology teaches us to ground our general theses in the analysis of experiences that are themselves capable of yielding general

assumptions. So an expression that is “normal and average” is like that precisely because the question “Is this that I wanted to express?” does not arise. At the same time, there are experiences that reveal that for every expression, we can pose the question of intention, even if only in retrospect (in some cases).

The two methods, that of phenomenology and of ordinary language philosophy, are not that far from each other, if phenomenology gives up on the dream of the method of apodictic evidence, and if following Cavell, we understand ordinary language philosophy as a transcendental inquiry. Both methods are about something that is shared (experience and language), and neither of them can guarantee to describe it adequately: they have to offer their descriptions to the public.

The theses of the dissertation

Emmanuel Lévinas and Stanley Cavell

In both of the major works of Emmanuel Lévinas, expression plays a decisive role, but in a different manner. In *Totality and Infinity*, the other or the face is none other than expression: he can undo the totality only because he speaks. In *Otherwise than Being*, the focus is not on the other’s expression, but on my own. Here the concept of “Saying” is connected to that of expression, but uncovering their exact connection is a serious task for interpretation. In both works, we can distinguish between the positive description and the negative determinations of expression, the latter defining it in light of the ontological and ethical propositions.

In *Totality and Infinity*, the other is present in his expression in the sense that he is interpreting it incessantly. The first word of expression is expression itself, meaning that the other expresses that he is expressing; in other words, the other teaches, but first of all he teaches this teaching itself.

While expression undoes its form and opposes itself to representation, the work is essentially alienated from the creating will, and receives its meaning from its context. The work is given over to an alien *Sinngebung*, to an interminable psychoanalysis, and finally it is integrated into the totality of history. Expression, on the other hand, has meaning without context, precedes the opposition of true and false, and has an essential sincerity.

This means that here expression is formal and reduced, in the sense that Lévinas uncovers what it means *that* the other expresses *at all*, and does not give an ethical meaning to his

expressing *something* – because this *something*, the expressed, becomes immediately part of totality. But since the transcendence of the other is not just formal but also has an ethical sense, the fact that he expresses gains a sort of ethical quasi-content. “The primordial expression, the first word is: ‘you shall not commit murder.’” The other appears as someone outside of the world, as a stranger, destitute, or proletarian, and thus his expression makes a claim upon me to give, to share my world with him, by speaking.

Here Lévinas draws conclusions instead of describing experiences: *because* the expression of the other makes a claim upon me, my expression *must be* an answer; *because* his expression has an ethical quasi-content, my expression *must be* responsibility, and *because* I do not respond to claims with specific content, it *must be* infinite responsibility.

There is a contradiction in *Totality and Infinity* between the claims that the other imposes himself on me, and that I must welcome his expression properly. Rhetoric, which is absent from no discourse, approaches the other “not to face him, but obliquely” – but if we interpret it in a way that it is the free choice of the Ego to avoid rhetoric and face the other, than we would make the other’s transcendence dependent upon this free choice. However, there are other propositions which fit better into the framework of the book, where the expression of the other and of the Ego are essentially dependent upon each other: “the *orientation* of being ‘starting from oneself’ toward ‘the Other’ has priority over the terms that are placed in it.”

In *Otherwise than Being*, expression is inextricably woven into the concept of Saying, and is entangled with other concepts such as obsession, infinite responsibility, vulnerability, etc. Therefore, we need a thread to uncover what this work says about the meaning of my expressiveness, about the sense *that* I express: a draft of a phenomenological description of expression, which can incorporate many notions connected to the concept of Saying, some of which are seemingly unrelated to the problem of expression.

Expression is not just for the other, it is *by the other*, which means: *despite oneself*. But the fact that I’m expressive cannot be reduced to being exposed to the other’s gaze: it is *me* who is expressing *myself*. Saying is thus the expression of expression, “the denuding of denuding”, “a sign given of this giving of signs” – Lévinas calls this “pre-reflexive iteration”. The activity of giving signs does not exclude “a passivity more passive than all passivity”: I did not choose to be expressive, and it is impossible for me not to express.

Expression is diachronic, as its temporality is not part of the synchrony of the Said. Since the time of the other does not coincide with my own time, and since the expression is by the other, there is a lapse of time that separates the expression from the consciousness, which is always delayed. So the temporality of expression is a past that bypasses the present. That

expression is not of the present of the consciousness, and that it is essentially corporeal, does not mean that the I, or self, of the expression is the body, as opposed to the consciousness: it features an identity of the body and the psyche that is incomprehensible, once we thematize it.

Despite all the differences between the ontologies of Lévinas's two major works, the negative delineations of expression are similar in both of them. Saying is opposed to the Said, that is, to representation, and thus it precedes the game of true and false, and in this sense has an essential sincerity. And expression is formal in this work too: Saying is not the expression of *something*, it is the sense *that I express at all*. And there is also an ethical quasi-content in this formal expression in *Otherwise than Being* too: Saying is giving and infinite responsibility.

Although some interpreters have tried to show that some Said "contents" are more in line with the ethical sense of Saying (for Etienne Feron, it was pronominality, for Rodolphe Calin, hermeneutics), *Otherwise than Being* cannot account for the fact that expression is always the expression of something. The trace of the Saying in the Said becomes visible in the Unsaid, in the interminable criticism of skepticism, in the fact that the Said cannot become a closed totality.

A further problem with *Otherwise than Being* is that it does not demonstrate phenomenologically its central thesis, that is, it does not show why it is possible to unite in the concept of Saying the themes of expression, obsession, substitution, infinite responsibility, etc. Sometimes it is only a structural analogy that ties different notions together (like that of the diachrony of expression and of aging), sometimes it is a kind of *emphatic conclusion*: for the offering of expression to be radical enough, it *must become* substitution; or in order to prevent the passivity of obsession from becoming the passivity of the effect in a causal chain, it *must become* offering oneself, that is, it must become expression.

Lévinas offers plenty of inspiration for a description of expression, but in order to be able to account for the fact that it is the expression of *something*, we must reject the oppositions stemming from his ontology and ethics, as these do not make it possible to describe how the expressed meanings are constituted intersubjectively – for Lévinas, all specific contents become part of a totality. If we reject this, we must abandon one of Lévinas's most celebrated theses, according to which all expression is a response, as it is a conclusion based on the ethical quasi-content of expression.

In concentrating on the expression of the other and of the self, we need to make a decision in one of the most important questions about Lévinas' philosophy: whether the Other is each and every other man and woman, and the face to face relation is an everyday event, or

whether the Other is something exceptional (coming from an other culture or playing a crucial role in the story of my life etc.), and the ethical encounter is a rare but important, presumably decisive, event. We side with the first answer, as expression (and other phenomena Lévinas describes, like that of aging, enjoyment, nourishment, fatigue etc.) is an everyday phenomenon. The other interpretation is based on prejudices against the everyday (say, that it is the realm of unquestioned order) and also on certain unresolved tensions inherent in Lévinas' philosophy (that he doesn't make clear the connections between everyday phenomena and the seemingly rare and exceptional infinite responsibility).

In describing how the expressed meaning is constituted in an intersubjective relation, we turn to the philosophy of Stanley Cavell. His philosophy has connections to that of Lévinas (the separateness of the other, the relations of expression, response, responsibility and skepticism), and his notion of acknowledgement is instrumental in describing the intersubjective constitution of expressed meanings. The expression of the other becomes expression only when I acknowledge it, if I respond to it, but my acknowledgement is not just an act of free will independent of the other. What he expressed is not his, nor mine, but is not part of a totality either: it takes shape in the space between us. Acknowledgement can be denied, and this is what nourishes skepticism about other minds: if I don't acknowledge the other (and I have no *reason* to do that, as the skeptic points out), then I cannot know him. But Cavell does not give transcendental descriptions of the kind offered by Lévinas to support his claims, so we cannot simply "synthesize" the two philosophies or "correct" Lévinas using Cavell.

The description of expression

The second part of the dissertation is a description inspired by these two philosophers. Its point of departure is a simple event: I move my hand in a way that the other understands it as a gesture, the expression of my excitedness – and thus it *becomes* this expression, even though I did not have any intention to express. I can discuss an attribution of expression: I can acknowledge or deny it, and if I'm successful in denying, then the act in question is withdrawn from the space of expression.

In experiences like that I can realize that *everything* I do or that is connected to me can become an expression in the specific intersubjective space of expression. That space is opened up when the other *addresses me*. The address singles me out, it opens up a space in an acute instant that cannot be deduced from my former situation, but rejoins my world immediately.

For the space of expression, a special kind of reflexive knowledge is needed: I must know that the other knows that I know that we are in this space. Without that (for example when the other spies upon me) we can't say that I express anything, though my behavior can have meaning and this meaning can be subject to a debate later.

The expression is not just for the other: it becomes expression only *by the other*, and thus it withdraws itself from the authority of the consciousness. But at the same time I don't just passively bear the attribution of expression by the other: it is *my expression*; it does not simply betray me, but I *disclose myself*. The fact that I am expressive does not just mean that I'm exposed to the other's gaze or sense-giving: I *offer myself*. In this offering there is a surplus to exposure: I express that I'm expressing. But as the expression does not happen in the realm of consciousness, this iteration cannot be disclosed phenomenally in every expression. It can be shown in deliberate expressions (I must intend to make my intention expressed), or in special "pure" expressions like the caress. This reference of expression to itself also appears in the acknowledgement, but it is not clear whether it just acknowledges or actively creates it; and it can be shown that in the absence of this reference we cannot talk about expression.

While expression is generally conceived as an activity, the offering of myself, as its condition of possibility, is passive: it is impossible for me not to express. There is a unity of the self in expression: it is not the act of the consciousness, nor of the body as opposed to the mind. But this unity is incomprehensible for the consciousness. Offering myself in expression entails an engagement to language, but also in a passive sense. For something to be an expression it must become part of a language, be it the language of words or gestures etc.

Each expression can be made a subject of a debate, in which I can either acknowledge fully or partly what the other has attributed to me, or deny it altogether. The subject of this debate is not the interpretation of a fact: if I can persuade the other that the movement of my hand was not an expressive gesture, it *ceases* to be an expression. A debate can never be closed definitely: in principle, every act of expression can become a subject of a debate again and again. Acknowledgement can be implicit, like in "normal, average, or successful" expressions: it is precisely this implicitness that makes them "normal".

A debate can have no further consequences: out of two actions that can be described as exactly the same from an outsider's point of view the first can be acknowledged as an expression and the second can be denied to be one. But denial can have the consequence of losing an entire realm of my expressions, my life. So if I deny too many times that my

intonation is expressive, it can become monotonous and lifeless. But these realms can be regained; inexpressiveness can prove to be a fantasy.

If a debate is not closed with a (temporal) agreement, if there is no shared, intersubjective meaning, then the interiority of the ego and of the other are separated from the space of expression, but this kind of interiority is relative to the intersubjective space.

Various strategies can be used in this debate and various subjects can be discussed. In the dissertation the themes of common history, language games and the body are analysed, but this list is not meant to be exhaustive. I can refer to our *shared history* with the other in order to establish a meaning that can be part of this story or deny one that cannot (“we are childhood friends, why would I imply that?”). We can discuss the rules of language games and these games themselves can become a subject of discussion, for example, we can judge them using moral arguments. It is possible that I have to acknowledge that I expressed what the other attributes to me, but nonetheless I don’t recognize that as *mine* – I know that the story that forms my identity or the language game I use entail that what I did means this or that, that I expressed that, but I can feel alienated from my own expression and thus my story or language.

The body or various and constantly changing parts of the body can have different senses in the debate. Acknowledgement means that I acknowledge the part of my body (e. g. my eyes that smiled while I said something) as expressive. I can deny the attributed expression by explaining it through the rationality of an act done with a specific goal in mind, and so attributing it to the *acting body*; or explain what happened as an effect in a casual chain, and attributing it to the *physical body*. The different senses of the body are related to different forms of intersubjectivity and different forms of the mind–body relation.

While the question of intention is not posed in a “normal or average” expression, it *can be* posed concerning every single expression. Acknowledgement acknowledges an expression as intentional, if not necessarily as an act with a conscious intention. Even when there is an intention during the act that becomes expression by the other, this intention and the acknowledged intention are different by principle, the latter existing only in the intersubjective space of the expression. The fantasy of “someone understanding me the way I am” means that this special someone understands not just my expressions as I intended them, but understands me without my intention to express at all – so this fantasy leads to the annihilation of expression, thus demonstrating that the relation between intention and expression is not at all straightforward.

The problem of intention is also connected to the problem of the subconscious. Subconscious intention is the result of a reconstruction in the acknowledgement, and later it can prove to be a construction. This subconscious is not a unity governed by laws uncovered by psychoanalytic theories, but exists only in the intersubjective space of expression.

The temporality of expression is diachronic. The difference between the time of the other and my own time manifests itself in a *lapse of time* that separates the time of my action and the time when it becomes an expression by the other. I have to *wait* to see whether what I did *was* an expression, and what I expressed (according to the other). Even though this lapse can be minimal in the physical sense, it cannot be reduced. So the time of expression is a past that cannot be rendered present. The segmentation of my expression is also determined by the other, by what she understands as *one* expression. This temporality does not follow a rhythm that the consciousness could adapt to. The temporality of the discussion is marked by retroactivity, but it also can determine the possible meaning of my future expressions (e. g. by shaping our common history).

The space of expression is asymmetrical. The other, simply by her otherness (her positional difference) and not by her specific qualities or social position, has precedence over me. She initiates the opening of this space by addressing me, the expression is by her, it is to her that I offer myself. In the discussion, the asymmetry manifests itself in the differences of “access”, and in the way that when I can’t persuade her, it is me who is left alone with his “subjective inner truth” that cannot influence what is “out there”.

The other expresses too, and I can understand everything she does as an expression – but it becomes that only if she acknowledges it. It is *she* who expresses and not only her “exterior surface”, but nonetheless there is always a possibility that she withdraws – or has already withdrawn – herself into her inaccessible interiority. Thus the other offers herself but at the same time withdraws herself.

Expression has a double aspect: on the one hand, it can constantly change during the always possible discussion, but on the other hand, it is a *fait accompli* – a fact that can be recorded, and only its interpretation can be made a subject of discussion. While in the sense delineated above, everything I do *can* become an expression, in this sense, everything *is* an expression: it reveals me as a personality and as a member of my group, class, society, or nation. Expression as *fait accompli* has a specific kind of intersubjectivity: it is for the *public*. That is not a set of people, but a set of positions that are equal in principle and whose differences lie only in the availability of information. These contingent differences in terms of

the information available have a bearing on the interpretations of the facts that are the same for everyone.

Neither of the two aspects of expression can be reduced to the other; and at the same time they are two aspects (and not two different meanings) of expression, as can be shown in phenomena that can only be accounted for by the tensions between these aspects (e. g. the phenomenon of the celebrities who are constantly transgressing the boundaries between the public and the private). In various forms of expression, one or the other aspect can be dominant, and this is determined by culture and is subject to change.

In expression as *fait accompli*, the content can be discerned and it can be analyzed as a separate entity. As opposed to this, expression reveals its subject as a personality. Everything I do reveals me; it is impossible for my personality not to reveal itself, but I cannot express it intentionally. I *face* my own personality, and that is why I can feel alienated from it or might intend to change it. Personality in this sense is not a given unity, but the frame for the interpretation of expressions; it is united only in the sense that I am responsible for all of its revelations.

Expression is also a cultural fact; I reveal facts about my various groups, but exactly what groups we assume to exist is open to interpretation. While for something to be an expression in the first sense, a language game is necessary, in the second sense, only the existence of structures, of social connections, is needed. (My hairstyle can express that I am a rebel only if there is an appropriate language game; but even when there is not, my hair reveals something about me and my culture.) The interpretation of an expression as a cultural fact shows a special kind of asymmetry. We can say for example that it is not right to judge others by their ethnicity, while the demand for myself can be that I examine myself, my position, in society. This asymmetry is a moral one, unlike the one that lies in the heart of expression in the first sense.

The relationship between these two aspects of expression poses the question whether my expressions are *mine*. In some experiences I can feel that I say this or that only because this is the thing *to say*, because “people” (of my group) say it. This experience can entail the task of acquiring my own language, making it mine – this language that is mine would be the same, but at the same time essentially other. This task is equally political, esthetic and philosophical.

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