Experience of the Alien in Husserl’s Phenomenology

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The alien (das Fremde) is a perplexing phenomenon that tracked down Husserl more than he tracked it. This curiosity will be the theme of our reflections as we inquire with Husserl into the thing itself.

The alien is related to the uncanny. In part enticing, in part threatening, it belongs to the constant challenges of a human experience that is never entirely at home in its world. One can react to the alien in a variety of ways: one can flee or pursue, fend it off or hold it in regard. A vast spectrum of possibilities unfolds between xenophobia and xenophilia. The alien becomes virulent in those life and historical phases in which orders fluctuate and supports of order totter. Shifts of order pull shifts of alienness in its wake, with all the signs of ambivalence. The semantic field of the alien, which reaches far beyond the confines of philosophy, speaks a clear language: it extends from clinical or social alienation (Entfremdung) to the artistic craft of alienation (Verfremdung) to the infant’s shying away from strangers (Fremdeln) to the strange bewilderments (Befremdlichkeiten) of everyday life.

Had Husserl let himself get carried away with pros and cons, he would not have been the sober thinker that he was. The gesture of the distancing abstention peculiar to his phenomenology strives for an attitude in which the alien as alien comes into relief. The logos of the phenomena must also hold good as the logos of the alien. The inquiry into an alien-experience, as with all experience, therefore is a matter of questioning and bringing “to expression its proper sense.”
All this sounds more obvious than it is. In reality, there brews beneath philosophy a secret horror alieni that temptingly strives to dispell the alien of everything enigmatic and strange. This attempt to tame the alien can assume a variety of forms. One can underplay the opposition between own and alien as if they were mere variants occurring in experience. One can try to overcome the opposition in an all-encompassing order that assigns to everything its proper place. One can raise it up to the driving mechanism of a total development that strives, through all oppositions, towards a general reconciliation. Finally, and more modestly, one can mitigate the opposition by recourse to universal norms which place the own and alien on equal footing with each other. The experience of the alien as alien wanes in a host of ways in different forms of appropriation. This appropriation revolves around two poles in our modern tradition: the own ego and the general logos. The retreat into the own and the incorporation into a whole menace the alien. Here both instances, the ego and the logos, ally themselves in multiple ways. The fecund expression of the alliance is found in Kant's celebrated motto of Enlightenment, where the mere sapere aude is carried over to the gesture of practical self-appropriation: "Have courage to serve your own understanding!"—which, we might add, does not belong to you alone. An innocent motto, and in a certain respect, necessary. But it does not acquit us of the task of examining the peculiar sense of this ownness which is simply taken for granted, and likewise the alienness of reason which is thereby supressed.

Whether Husserl himself successfully negotiated the obstacles of egocentrism and logocentrism with his theory of alien-experience remains to be seen. In any case his inquiry into an experience of the alien signifies an attempt. The radicalness of this attempt and its relevance to the contemporary debates surrounding subjectivity and rationality earns our consideration, a consideration we also find, by the way, when we think of authors like Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Derrida.

What does Husserl understand by alienness (Fremdheit)? In a posthumously published text from 1933, in which he contrasted the familiar, common, accessible home-world with the alien-world, Husserl characterized alienness as "accessibility in genuine inaccessibility, in the mode of incomprehensibility" (XV 631). Here he had in mind "heterogeneous (fremdartige) people and cultures," which in their heterogeneity belong to the opening horizon of our familiar surroundings that is "indirect," i.e., nonintuitable. This is already a special case of relative alienness. Indeed, the paradoxical formulation with which Husserl characterizes alienness shows quite precisely what is at issue. Something is accessible—not in spite of—but rather in its inaccessibility. Alienness is precisely that. And as something that cannot be comprehended, alienness does not mean that the door to reality is bolted shut, but rather that its sense is not fully disclosed. Our eyes see and yet do not see;