

**SENSATION, ALTERITY AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS :  
ON FICHTE AND LEVINAS**

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**I. Introduction**

Many of the commentaries produced on the relation between Fichte and Levinas focus on the concept of intersubjectivity in Fichte's *Doctrine of Natural Law* in contrast to Levinas' attempt to think the concept of the other appropriately. In particular, the summons [*Aufforderung*] in Fichte's theory of recognition has recently found much attention even by scholars who are usually not deeply attracted to German Idealism or to Phenomenology.

More specifically, almost all of these commentators fail to see the connection between Fichte's practical philosophy and his theoretical philosophy, as he developed it in his early *Science of Knowledge*. In this paper, therefore rather than focusing on the usual, I shall focus on these aspects of Fichte's and Levinas' philosophies, and I shall place especial emphasis on their treatment of the sensual sphere, which they conceive to be the key to understanding subjectivity. By doing this, I will attempt to correct certain distortions in the aforementioned reception, which does not seem to be aware of the fact that otherness – in Fichte, and in Levinas – is originally an *affective* structure that belongs to (classically put) transcendental aesthetics.

In this vein, Levinas claims that prior to any being-affected from the outside by any kind of causal influence, and thus prior to any "hetero-affection," sensing is open to the Other. Rather surprisingly, Fichte develops a similar perspective on otherness in his – quite phenomenological – analysis of feeling, sensing, and being-affected. Further analysis should lead us to conclude that Fichte is attempting to think affectivity in terms of *openness*. Indeed, it is through the alien element of feeling, that the ego is radically opened up to what is other than itself, and thus it is characterized precisely through being affected by this internal "othering," as having an alien element within itself. Accordingly, in my paper I will uncover this primitive concept of otherness, which precedes any level of

“recognition.” Due to time constraints, however, I will not discuss in any detail the further step towards a full theory of intersubjectivity.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Fichte’s Conception of Affection

Fichte’s analysis of sensation and affectivity is closely related to what has been called in recent Phenomenological work the distinction between hetero- and auto-affection, that is, the difference between two types of affection, one of which is a form of affection by oneself and the other one of which is the form of an affection by something other than oneself (Zahavi 1998). Fichte’s argument in this context is remarkably clear: any relation to an object, he claims, presupposes a self-relation, within which the Ego is related to itself. Put in phenomenological words, Fichte claims that intentionality, here understood as any type of object-relation, requires a prior non-intentional relation in which the ego is “having” itself as entertaining these object-relations as its own relations. We would do well to further investigate Fichte’s claim.

In his *Second Introduction to the Science of Knowledge* we find an interesting section within which Fichte deals with Kant’s concept of sensation by quoting Kant’s introduction to his *First Critique* in which he defines sensibility as “the mode in which we are affected by objects” (KRV, A19/B33; IWL, 72). As Fichte further explains, Kant’s claim here should not be understood as a simple instance of naïve realism, since even Kant could not have meant by his initial definition of sensibility that we are in some “direct” contact with objects or things; rather, “object” here refers to a transcendental concept, by means of which thinking and intuition are united for consciousness. “All of our cognition,” as Fichte states, “does indeed begin with *an affection*, but not with an affection *by an object*” (IWL, 74). In a first step this can be explained by the assumption that objects, in order to be objects, are dependent on thoughts. For the constitution of objects requires unity, it requires categorical constitution, it requires space and time, and so on. Consequently, what Fichte has in mind is that affection, if it is taken as one source of knowing and consciousness, must first be explained without direct reference to objects or things, since thinghood is constituted by pure thoughts. In addition, in making the claim

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Scribner has pointed out that we find in Fichte the attempt to escape the problem of how a rational claim can appear in the sensual sphere by taking the lived Body as a *Gestalt* and the *Gesicht* (face) as a paradigm for a form of perception in which the other appears. As he points out, in German the word “Gesicht” has a double meaning: on the one hand it can be used for “sight” or “look” [for example, *zu Gesicht bekommen* means to see something directly face to face] and “face” (see Scribner 2000, 155; see also Manz 1994, 209). Fichte’s conception of the body tries to unite sensual intuition and on the other hand it can be used for a reconstruction of the “ethical call.”

that objects affect the Ego or consciousness, we already presuppose a categorical aspect, namely, the *relation* between what we call “affection” and “object.” This category is “being effected” or, simply put, “causality.” However, “being effected” is, at least according to Kant and Fichte, a pure thought, which normatively functions as one part of the faculty of understanding. Accordingly, in order to claim that an object “affects” us we already presuppose what we would like to explain. For, in order to make the claim that an object effects our affection or sensations, we already presuppose, on the one hand, the *having of the sensation* itself (sensing), and, on the other hand, the *difference between sensation and object*. Consequently, both the sensation and the object must be transcendently explained instead of simply being taken as facts: In this vein, we shall raise the following questions: how do we originally “have” or “encounter” sensations, and how do we constitute in thought “objecthood,” such that we can take sensations to be part of our representations of objects?

What are, then, sensations that are not immediately conceived as having the status of an object? As Fichte further explains, the concept of sensation forces us to make a further distinction between *limitation* and *determined limitation*, insofar as we must presuppose that in a sensation the Ego, taken to mean here some kind of activity, must be related to what it negates. By introducing the concept of “sensation” we certainly introduce a first simple distinction, namely, the sensation itself and that from which the sensation is differentiated in order to be sensation. If it is not the object from which we distinguish the sensation, then it must be the Ego from which we distinguish the sensation. Consequently, a sensation is not a “neutral” event in the world or a fact in the world; rather, a sensation is only a sensation if it is experienced or “sensed” *by* or *in* the Ego. Accordingly, it is not enough to claim that there is a difference between Ego and sensation: we must also claim that Ego and sensation are related *to* each other. The non-neutral relation between Ego and sensation further implies that the Ego is in some sense “restricted” by the sensation, since sensing is a *specific* form of the Ego. From this it follows that the Ego’s activity is *limited in* sensing; however, we should be sure to avoid the claim that the Ego is limited *by* the sensation (which would lead us back to the original mistake). Alternatively, we must claim that sensation (on a first level) precisely means or is identical with an Ego that is limited *in* its activity. Put simply, limitation here means *being* limited, which in turn means not being infinite. Consequently, sensation further analyzed turns out to be identical with the sensing Ego. To repeat the main point for the purpose of clarification: we are not (yet) talking about objects, such as tables or trees, since we are concerned with analyzing the sensing Ego independently from its *identified* relations. Sensing is indeed different from intentionality.

However, we must go a step further in our analysis, given that it is not the case that the Ego simply finds itself being limited or finds itself as a limited Ego; instead, it finds

itself being limited in a *determined* way. For example, the Ego is not just sensing, it is sensing *cold* or *warm*, we are seeing *red* or *green*, or we are tasting *sweet* or *sour*. The Ego is restricted on this level, since it does not have the power over what it itself is on this level of our world constitution. In this connection, that we experience *this* color or *this* taste is outside of our own determination. Fichte calls this determined limitation *feeling* instead of “sensation” (see Piche 1998, 74).

Feeling is a relation between the Ego and itself. As Fichte states, “it is undoubtedly an immediate fact of consciousness that I feel *myself* to be determined in a particular way” (IWL, 76). Fichte’s reasoning is not very hard to understand. For example, what I feel when I feel cold is not the snow, but instead, my own being cold. If we take it for granted that in every experience of sensibility the Ego is not related to an object, but rather to an immediate form of being affected, then sensation can here only mean that the Ego finds itself to be determined [*bestimmt*] in a certain way. The determination, in other words, should not be understood as a determination that could be applied to something “outside” the Ego; rather, sensation expresses a specific way, in which the Ego has and encounters itself. For another example, when I touch the table with my finger, while it is certainly true that some kind of intentionality is in place which regulates the constitution of what we are directed to, namely the table, nevertheless, what I really *feel* when I touch the surface of the table is my own touching the table and my own limitation in my experience. More specifically, I am aware of this specific quality as a specific mode of myself, namely touching. Accordingly, what I *feel* is not the surface of the table or the table; rather, I feel myself being in a specific mode.

At this point we can see that Fichte is attempting to think affectivity in terms of *openness*. Through the alien element of feeling, the ego is radically opened up to what is other than itself *before* it encounters objects, but, paradoxically, the ego also finds itself as having an alien element “*within* the ego” (SW I, 272). Feeling is thereby revealed to be the true locus of both self-consciousness *and* other-consciousness. Since this limitation is simultaneously experienced as a limitation within the ego, we could attempt to reread Fichte in such a way as to show that this “splitting” of the ego rests on consciousness having to accept within itself something irreducibly alien, in the sense of an original *alterity* that simply escapes the ego, yet still determines it. For Fichte, then, something “heterogeneous, alien” (SW I, 272) is not only found “in” the ego, but *befalls* subjectivity – while it still yet slips away from the ego in a particular way, for otherwise it could not be experienced as something that is *not at my disposal*. This chasm of the incomprehensibly foreign and contingent – a chasm that opens up within the ego itself and leads to a “rupture separating the subject from itself” – (SW I, 328) – cannot be bridged, but is inscribed in the very life of the subject.

Fichte draws further characteristics of feeling from its interplay with the ego as a striving ego. Indeed, affection is only possible within this interplay, which involves an ego that is both a striving, i.e., a longing ego, *and* an ego that finds itself limited or restricted, and therefore under compulsion. Thus the ego's striving can be grasped in terms of a dialectic between activity and undergoing or suffering, hence between longing and compulsion: on the one hand, the ego *feels* itself, and to this extent it is to be characterized as acting; on the other hand, the ego is *felt*, and to this extent it is to be characterized as undergoing (cf. SW I, 289). For Fichte, then, a feeling comes about only as a living expression (Fichte terms it a "manifestation" [*Äußerung*]) of both of these poles. In this way, feeling is not primarily to be characterized in terms of an object belonging to it, but rather, as the ego's *self-affection*, so that "the ego 'encounters' itself, as it were, in each of these two modes of its activity" (Buchheim 1997, 320).

This result of our brief Fichte interpretation should strike phenomenologists as surprising, especially since we are accustomed to taking Fichte's philosophy as an abstract construction of highly speculative ideas. However, as we now see, even in terms of his theoretical philosophy, we should correct this view. In what follows, I shall make this claim even stronger, by laying out Levinas' phenomenology of enjoyment as it is expressed in his *Totality and Infinity*.

### III. Levinas' Conception of Subjective Life

As we know, Levinas also strove to reappropriate the concept of subjectivity by reinterpreting the sensual sphere as the core both of our experience and of the world. Thus, for Levinas, subjectivity is "below", or rather, "before" intentionality. As he puts it right at the beginning of the first chapter in *Totality and Infinity*, the relation to the other is preceded by a sphere, within which the subject remains totally self-related, referred to by Levinas as "separation as inner life" (TI, 110). This "inner life" of the subject, according to Levinas, has its own complex structure, which is centered in a form of self-having and self-encounter that Levinas calls "enjoyment." Enjoyment, simply put, for Levinas, is the very mode in which a subject is conscious of itself without having itself as an object. Interestingly, Levinas uses precisely the same argument that we encountered before in Fichte, insofar as he claims that the content of enjoyment should not be taken as "an effect or cause" (TI, 111). This is to say that enjoyment or self-affection is not the result of a relation towards an object; and that it is rather the very condition of this relation. For, before a subject is able to build up a relation towards what it is not, it must encounter itself in what it is. This presupposed self-consciousness is not propositionally structured, but it is

a form of sensing: “Enjoyment,” as Levinas states, “is precisely the way the act nourishes itself with its own activity” (TI, 111). For example, in eating a piece of food, I am not only related to the food; instead, I am *feeling* myself eating the food. What I enjoy, precisely put, is not the food; rather, what I enjoy is myself eating the food. This self-affection is *positive* since I cannot free myself from myself in the moment of the enjoyment of affection. I passively “accept” it, so to speak.

As Levinas convincingly points out, this form of enjoyment is not an empirical structure; rather, it is *the very structure of life itself*. Seen from this point of view, the sensual sphere is the very core of subjectivity, because we are unable to separate ourselves from ourselves in our being alive (though we are separated in our being alive from the other). In addition, this form of affective self-consciousness is non-thetical and pre-reflective, and Levinas calls it “happiness.” What he has in mind is our inability to put ourselves into distance to ourselves in our being alive and in our living *from* what we experience. The argument here is clear: even if it would be possible to place myself in distance to myself, every act of distancing would presuppose that I am enjoying myself *in* my act of distancing. Accordingly, enjoyment is the positive confirmation of myself in everything I do, think, or desire. Levinas is here – though in a non-theoretical way – employing a mixture of Descartes’ and Hegel’s thoughts. Enjoyment is the absolute identity of the Ego whereby it remains solely concerned with itself. In happiness “I am absolutely for myself” (TI, 134), as he puts it. The identity of myself with myself that “enjoyment” and “happiness” express can therefore not be interpreted as something that makes the Ego unfree. Rather, as Levinas underlines, the ego is living from everything it does or thinks and since it finds only itself in everything it produces in its acts, it remains solely with itself and therefore enjoys itself in its own sameness: “it acquires its own identity by this dwelling in the ‘other’” (TI, 115).<sup>2</sup> The Ego remains isolated as an Ego, as it cannot escape itself in its own activities and in its own world.

What Levinas in his further elaboration of this identity claims about “the elemental” (TI, 131), can be seen as a further unfolding of the same idea. The sensual sphere is the very core of subjectivity because the subject is incapable of *objectifying* this sphere. Every attempt to objectify or to reflect on this sphere presupposes that in this very act of objectification the objectification is itself “encountered,” that is, *enjoyed*. “One is steeped in it” (TI, 131), as Levinas puts it. Since this elemental sensuality is the condition for the possibility of *every* relation, we must accept it as a given, which is not produced or effected by something other than itself. “The element,” as Levinas says, “comes to us from nowhere” (TI, 132).

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<sup>2</sup> By “other” Levinas here does not (yet) mean the (ethically encountered) Other.

#### IV. Evaluation

Much more could and should be said about Levinas' rejection of Husserl as well as about his appropriation of Hegel's philosophy, which is present in Levinas' considerations about dwelling, about the body, and about representation as a structure that emerges out of the enjoyment of life. In regard, however, to what we have discovered in Fichte, let me point out the following points:

[1] Both Fichte and Levinas, if we reduce their analyses to arguments, make precisely the same points: (a) every relation to something presupposes a medium, which is the sensual sphere; (b) this sensual sphere, if it is the condition of our relations to objects, cannot itself be an object-relation; (c) consequently, it must be described in a different way, namely as a self-affection. In this self-affection, the ego is *purely* with itself.

[2] Both Fichte and Levinas claim that self-affection is – logically put – a combination of identity and difference, the middle term of which is *limitation*. Even Levinas, rather astonishingly, uses this term and points out that limitation has nothing to do with external facts, such as birth and death, but rather, with the *unknown* moment within the sensual sphere.

[3] The latter, we might say, leads both Fichte and Levinas to claim that something “foreign is encountered within” (WL, 189) the Ego. It is so close to ourselves that we cannot deal with it, except by accepting and confirming it.

[4] If we play around a bit with this paradoxical structure, then we should see that it is only a small step towards the introduction of the idea that this “foreign” element within the Ego must be taken to imply the prior claim that the other makes on us and the prior form of non-identity to which we can only respond but never embrace.<sup>3</sup> *Because* we are unable to *represent* this moment of non-identity, we can only be *called forth* to a response; and it is precisely this structure that allows us to address it as ethical in nature. As Levinas in his later essay *No Identity* claims about this fundamental “openness of sensibility” (CP, 146), “already on the level of sensibility the subject is *for the other*: there is substitution, responsibility, expiation” (CP, 147).

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<sup>3</sup> It is, hence, not correct to claim – as Lumsden does – that Levinas “still argues for something like an empathetic relation to the Other” (Lumsden 2000, 238) in his later philosophy. As Manz points out, both Fichte and Levinas think of the “not-I” as something that escapes the conceptual power of the subject and of cognition (Manz 1994, 202). Manz further claims that in this moment of unavailability, both the constitution of the reality and the constitution of the other must meet; see also Lumsden 2000, 231. In addition, Lumsden's claim that the problem of the immediacy of the Other can be clarified with Hegel's account of Being in the opening section of his *Logic*, is not convincing, since the problem of the Other (at this point) is not a logical problem; but a phenomenological problem, which presupposes concepts such as immediacy, mediation, intuition, ethical subjectivity, etc.

[5] In sum, what remains foreign within the ego is a form of *welcoming the other* without *being directed to* the other. It seems to me that both Fichte and Levinas conceptualize subjectivity as an enclosed sphere and as a form of self-affection. Though Levinas is usually taken to be a philosopher who despises the concept of subjectivity, (a) we should not forget that at the center of his philosophy we find a conception of the sensual sphere as a form of self-affective life, and (b) we should underline that his own understanding of Fichte's philosophy is clearly a distortion of Fichte's subjective Idealism.



## Literature

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