

Prague, February 12, 2023



Report on Josef Matoušek, *Epoché as a Guideline to (Inter)Subjectivity. On the Extent of Husserl's Methodological Influence on Levinas and Sartre*

Final Evaluation: Admitted - The candidate's dissertation is ready for discussion

1. Descriptive Summary

This is the second, revised and highly improved version of a dissertation on two key-figures of the French phenomenological tradition: E. Levinas and J.-P. Sartre. I want to immediately emphasize that, with respect to the previous version, the candidate has done a very good job in improving the quality of the text, both in terms of its language and grammar and as regards the systematic flaws I previously pointed out. Thus, my *descriptive summary* in the following will not substantially diverge from that of the previous evaluation; I will try instead to raise new objections and ask new questions for the candidate to directly address during the defense.

The dissertation presents the reader with a highly ambitious—and double—project. On the one hand (this being the overall goal of the dissertation), the candidate aims at evaluating the extent of what he calls the “methodological influence” of Husserl's philosophy, notably, the concept of epoché on the works of both Levinas and Sartre. But such a *methodological influence* is declined—over the course of the dissertation—in several ways based upon the different topics that organize themselves around that methodological notion: self-awareness, the structure and sense of the *cogito*; the issue of intentionality; the opposition between (a certain conception of) intentionality and representation; and—last but not least—the overall

and crucial question of inter-subjectivity and otherness. On the other hand, the candidate develops step by step a critical stance upon the book by Kris Sealey, *Moments of Disruptions: Levinas, Sartre, and the Question of Transcendence*, which is in fact recalled and critically referred to throughout the dissertation and in relation to the topics progressively addressed.

This double aim confers onto the dissertation a quite peculiar structure and, if we can so put it, a “counterpoint”-like rhythm. The reader is in fact confronted with a back-and-forth movement from the main line of the thought (the discussion and reading of Levinas and Sartre against the backdrop of Husserl’s philosophy) to the critical assessment of Sealey’s book of those very same thinkers, and the other way around. In this respect, the candidate is able to slowly construct and present his thesis (or plurality thereof) in a double way: *positively*, by discussing the many different aspects of Husserl’s, Levinas’ and Sartre’s philosophy; but also *negatively*, by critically evaluating Sealey’s analyses and interpretations of them and of all the relevant problems.

As for the actual structure of the work, and sequence of chapters, the candidate proceeds carefully and slowly, yet systematically—building up his own position step by step. Every chapter both rests upon the major acquisitions of the previous one(s) and announces the possible future developments of its own implications. After an overall *introduction*, in which the layout of the work is presented to the reader, along with the reasons why Sealey’s book has been chosen as the polemical target of the discussion, *chapter one* quickly concerns itself with the role that the *cogito* plays in Descartes as well as Husserl (the goal being precisely to understand the transition from the former to the latter with a special focus on the famous *Paris Lectures*, later to be known as *Cartesian Meditations*). Here the candidate makes the case for considering the notion of *evidence* (§§9-11) as the actual key-concept of Husserl’s own Cartesianism, and the problem is precisely that of mapping out the many different types and species of evidence. It is at this stage (§13) that the methodological tool known as epoché is brought in by the candidate and is understood as the “source of purified data.” The epoché

is presented as a “radical method, through which the subject can seize himself with his ‘own pure conscious life’ precisely how it is and through which all objective world becomes accessible” (p. 30). And it is precisely the application of the method of the transcendental epoché-reduction that allows Husserl to both follow Descartes and distance himself from the author of the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (which is what the candidate talks about in §14 on Husserl’s refutation of Descartes). *Chapter two* builds on the first and already adopts a more critical tone vis-à-vis Sealey’s work. After the analysis of Husserl’s own refutation of Descartes’ conception of the *cogito*, the candidate introduces Levinas and Sartre: what is at the center of attention is their own respective positions on the *cogito*, hence upon the nature and structure of subjectivity. If in the case of Sartre, the candidate emphasizes the non-thetic and “pre-reflective” layer of consciousness (see in particular §18), when it comes to Levinas the aspect at stake is that of the “sensible” dimension of the subject, which alone allows him to re-think the nature of intentionality, thereby paving the way for a brand new approach to the problem of the other (see §§24-26). Already at this stage, the candidate remarks how Levinas, unlike Sartre, does not reject Descartes and Husserl—rather, he can be understood as “inclining” towards the former’s own position on the *cogito* (see also the candidate’s remarks in the closing pages of the dissertation (p. 162).

Chapter three has a peculiar nature and structure of its own—different from all the previous and the subsequent ones. For it presents itself as an intermezzo in which an overall picture (drawn in broad strokes) of the reception of Husserl’s phenomenology in France is offered to the reader. It is here that the candidate also goes back to the text of the *Cartesian Meditations* in order to both stress the pivotal role it played in the reception of Husserl’s phenomenology in the French speaking world and also lay emphasis on the central function of the “body” in Husserl’s analogical account of the other in the famous *Fifth Cartesian Meditation* (see in particular §32). The term “incarnation” is brought in (see §33), around which there revolves

the candidate's rehearsal of the analysis of the constitution of the other's body on the basis of the *here-there* relation/dichotomy.

Chapters four and five represent in many respects the center of the dissertation. It is here, in fact, that many of the implications entailed by the previous chapters are explicitly drawn and brought to light, thereby giving a more definite shape to the overall interpretation of Levinas and Sartre. The notion of "non-representational intentionality" is expounded upon (§§35-36), by which Husserl's own "conception of the Other as happening in the realm of knowledge" (p. 108) is finally rejected. By the same token, Sartre's distinction between "pre-egological" and egological consciousness is tackled anew and the problem is raised bearing upon the transition from the former to the latter. At the end, the candidate comes back to Levinas' criticism of Sartre concerning the problem of freedom (and the relation between the freedom of the subject and that of the other), stressing both the unbridgeable between the two, and the way Sartre himself would possibly respond to Levinas.

2. Merits of the Candidate's Approach and Methodology

The major merit of the candidate's approach lies for sure in the topic chosen: the concept of "transcendence"—explicitly or implicitly assumed as the *Leitfaden* of his confrontation with the different figures under scrutiny (be it Husserl, Levinas, Sartre and even Sealey). As far as I understand the candidate's line of thought, "transcendence" is assumed as a formal notion to be materially determined (if we can improperly speak *à la Husserl*) based upon the specific of discussion: *transcendence* can for example refer to consciousness' own ability to transcend itself, thereby standing for the problem of the nature and structure of intentionality, and, more in general, for that of the essence of consciousness itself. But *transcendence* can also point in direction of what *transcends* consciousness and presents itself as irreducible to its intentions, as is the case with the problem of the Other according to both its Husserlian, Levinassian as

well as Sartrean conception. (One could think of §23 on the core structure of subjectivity, or of §§25-27 in which we are ushered from the discussion of the temporality of intentional acts into the “problem of the other”). In so doing, the candidate is able to both give (sometimes implicitly; sometimes more explicitly) his dissertation (and discussion) a unitary layout while at the same time retaining the possibility of diversifying and differentiating his focus.

3. Objections and Discussion Questions

I highly appreciate the manner in which the candidate has seriously taken into account the objections made in the previous evaluation. For example, whereas I made the objection to the effect that he was using the terms *epoché* and *reduction* indifferently and without further ado, he has now written a new paragraph (§15), in which the very questions of the “multiplicity of reductions” in Husserl has been, if not completely solved, at least explicitly addressed. I am not sure whether I would agree with his description of the difference between transcendental and phenomenological reduction, but this is immaterial to the point. However, it is a pity that the elucidation of such crucial concepts takes place exclusively upon the basis of secondary literature (why?), and that, with the exception of a couple of references to the first volume of *Ideas the Cartesian Meditations*, no other primary source is employed (not even the famous *Husserliana XXXIV* with all its manuscripts on the topic at stake).

- Besides such first methodological objection, I would like to ask the candidate to elaborate on the arguments proposed in §35 ff., on Levinas’s criticism of intentionality as “representation” and the distinction between two types of intentionality in *Totality and Infinity* (p. 106 and ff.). On page 108, after a quotation from *Totality and Infinity* (p. 127), in which Levinas criticizes the privilege or priority of representation usually ascribed to intentionality (also by Husserl), the candidate hastens to warn, “I am convinced that above all in the *Cartesian Meditations*,

Husserl maintains a position that resembles quite a few moments from Levinas's middle thought and that they are conspicuously compatible." Could the candidate elaborate on this point? Which aspect of the *Cartesian Meditations* would he consider compatible with the thought of Levinas from the "middle period"?

- In addition to the just framed question, could also the candidate explain in what sense, for Levinas, "Husserl's conception of the Other [happens] in the realm of knowledge, in other words by means of a totalizing representation" (p. 108)? What does "knowledge" mean in this context? I am asking this question because the use of the term *knowledge* gives the misleading impression that the process of constitution (of the Other) is identified with the epistemological problem of how the ego gets to "know" the other... Which would be a real mistake. I would be interested in knowing whether the candidate agrees with Levinas on this point, or whether he thinks that the process of constitution is not per se of epistemological nature.

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These remarks being made, I think the candidate should be allowed to defend his work and be granted the title of Doctor. The dissertation contains interesting insights and a clear and strong willingness to tackle some of the crucial issues of early phenomenology. Moreover, the new version of the text shows how seriously he has taken into consideration the objections made against the first version.

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