


**ALTERITY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS: THE THESIS OF  
NON-INTENTIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS** <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2024.037-059>**Alexandre Soares Souza<sup>1</sup>****ABSTRACT**

This research aims to analyze alterity, based on the thesis of non-intentional consciousness of E. Levinas. The French philosopher is an important representative of discussions about alterity throughout the twentieth century, in addition to being a critic of the ontological framework that objectifies the human being. Many scholars recognize the author's political discourse, due to his experiences in the concentration camps, parallel to his reflections on otherness. However, few pay attention to the phenomenological bases of passive subjectivity in his philosophy. This work seeks to highlight the moment in which Levinas recognizes in the unintentional consciousness the possibility of deposing the sovereignty of the self. Now, the moment the ego is surprised by the Other, which is external to it, it owes it an answer.

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## INTRODUCTION

E. Levinas' initial reflections on otherness are influenced by the philosophy of E. Husserl. The reflexive paths traced by the philosopher from Kauna, which lead to his radical conception of alterity, start from the radical way in which Husserl structures phenomenology. Certainly, the Levinasian theses also do not abdicate the fundamental contribution of Martin Heidegger, especially his work *Being and Time*. It is from fundamental topics of Husserl's phenomenology, however, that the questions about the articulation with the French philosopher's thought are configured, with the notion of intentionality in vogue. Since the proposed discussion aims to analyze the Levinasian thesis of non-intentional consciousness, which is an impactful change for the Self, it also analyzes the role of the Other for the radical perception of subjectivity. There is no doubt that the aforementioned masters of Levinas are fundamental for the understanding of his philosophy, but the way in which he approaches the problems surrounding alterity makes his thought peculiar to the ethical discussion in philosophy. Levinas insisted on "speaking phenomenologically, beyond phenomenology itself", and this greatly explains how Husserl's philosophy does not fully substantiate his way of thinking.

This article is justified by highlighting the bases for the theme of alterity in Levinas' thought, indicating the moment in which the French philosopher recognizes Husserlian's limits. Levinas detects the limits of phenomenology because he understands that it still remains in the ontological realm. Its ethical formulation comprises the relationship of the "I" with the other, which rejects the predominance of the anonymity of existence (inherent to the I-it relationship), in the total denial of the objectification of the other. It is in the counterpoint of "good conscience", marked by intentionality, with "bad conscience", marked by passivity without intentionality, that Levinas situates the moment in which the Self is returned to its point of origin beyond ontology. Subjectivity, in this way, is awakened by the obligation to respond to someone.

It seeks to discuss the radical perception of alterity in Levinas' philosophy by analyzing the influences of E. Husserl, as well as his overcoming, in the analysis of intentional consciousness and in the horizons of meaning that act under the background of totalizing reason, in order to understand how the birth of the Self beyond itself occurs. In Levinas, the radical construction of subjectivity gives meaning to the other notion of alterity.

## PHENOMENOLOGY IN LEVINAS' THOUGHT: INFLUENCES OF E. HUSSERL

In his article "non-intentional consciousness", written in 1951, Levinas recognizes important concepts of E. Husserl's phenomenology and shows how they served as the

basis for the formulation of his discussion of otherness. The notion of horizons of meaning (related to the thought that is absorbed in thought), which suggests being in the present tense of the indicative, as well as the concept of intentionality (adjacent to horizons of meaning), are structuring elements of the thesis of "non-intentional consciousness" developed by Levinas. Intentional consciousness is a significant contribution of E. Husserl's philosophy, and the understanding of this encircles the horizons of meaning when inclined to thought, since it is through reflection that such horizons revive in the being of being. The thought, in turn, gains meaning as a concept, and this same makes an appeal to the thought that thinks it, determining, according to Levinas, the subjective articulation of its opinion. It is in the logic of this scheme that the notion of timelessness is linked to the discussion about being, in the present tense, which is the determinant of its phenomena. In the relationship between intentional consciousness and the object, Husserl is concerned with concreteness as the basis of thought. (HUSSERL, 2006) If Husserl's effort is commendable, as he seeks to develop concepts without taking away more from them than they could give, there still resides in the German philosopher's thought fully theoretical bases that echo the positivism of the nineteenth century.

Husserl follows the Western philosophical tradition in establishing the privilege of the theoretical, of knowledge, and of the ontological sense of being. Despite starting from phenomenological bases, Levinas directly indicates the moment in which he follows a different course from the ultimate positions of Husserl's transcendental philosophy. In the relationship between idealism and realism, the latter assumes a meaning that does not indicate an a priori world, and therefore remains within the scope of idealism. Professor Timm de Souza, commenting on Levinas, mentions that idealism calls into question the need for confrontation between idealist and realist positions, as it is the logical sense that starts to assume the determining space (SOUZA, 2010). The philosopher from Kaunas insists on the idea that there are concrete facts that go beyond the totalizations of knowledge or thought concreteness. That is, no matter how solid a thought concreteness or a perfected theory may be, they are incapable of understanding the events that place the Other in the condition of subordinate. Levinas says:

The being that appears to the self of knowledge not only instructs it, but, ipso facto, gives itself to it. Perception, on the other hand, captures; and the Begriff retains this meaning of domination. The "giving of oneself" - whatever the efforts that the distance "from the minutes to the lips" requires - is at the level of thinking thought, promises it, through its "transcendence", possession, enjoyment, satisfaction. As if thought thought to its measure by the fact that it can – incarnated thought – achieve what it thinks. Thought and psyche of immanence: of sufficiency to oneself. And this is precisely the phenomenon of the world: the fact that an agreement is secured in the grasp between the thinkable and the thinker, the fact that its appearing and also

a giving of itself, that its knowledge is a satisfaction, as if it came to satisfy a need.  
(LEVINAS, 2010, p. 168)

The agreement between the thinkable and the thinker is an important tonic of intentionality and reveals much about "self-sufficiency." The self of knowledge is instructed by the being that appears to it, which is also a giving, implying the configuration of the concept that suggests the idea of domination. This means that the self of knowledge conceptualizes the being that presents itself to it in order to achieve what it thinks. This possibility generates satisfaction, since conceptualizing is a pleasurability with oneself. Fabri is correct when he states that consciousness belongs to the being, because to whom it shows itself contracts a dependence in relation to the being (FABRI, 1997). Levinas tends to be more categorical in relation to Husserl's phenomenology, noting how in the subject, once it is a central reference in front of every concrete thought, the objective experience becomes an orientation towards the object, whose content does not suffer interference from the subject. Paradoxically, although the subject is the reference to conceptualize the object that is given, the subject remains behind the experience.

## THE INTENTIONALITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE RETURN OF THE SAME TO ITSELF

At the core of intentional consciousness there is the return of the Same to oneself, for in the understanding of something, there is the return to its generative energy, where knowledge and everything else is decided. This model, which overcomes the opposition between realism and idealism, is based on a form of realistic idealism whose philosophical system coincides with the unity of itself with itself. In other words, "the psyche of theoretical knowledge forms a thought that thinks according to its measure". That is why it is not difficult to imagine an immense world full of mirrors that reflect nothing but the image itself. Now, the way of thinking to one's own measure, in one's own adequacy to the thinkable, is self-consciousness. In the meantime, the same is found in the other. However, the effort made to guarantee reason its lucidity ends up privileging the positivity of the being that exhibits itself as a being. And in this attempt to lucidize, the "I think" predominates.

In this return to itself, through intentionality, the Same always seeks to situate itself with autonomy and firmness, to the point of suppressing otherness. The relationship between thought and the thinkable, along the lines of intentionality, makes it possible to verify that "what thought knows or what in its 'experience' it apprehends is, at the same time, the other and thought itself" (LEVINAS, 2002). That is why, when referring to being, thought is directed to something external, although, paradoxically, it remains in itself.

Levinas leads his reasoning to the evident sovereignty of the self, in which the self thinks is the ultimate form of the spirit as knowledge. In this way, all things are brought back to the I think, configuring a system, which, because it is intelligible, leads to self-consciousness. The "being-in-act", Levinas will tell us, is interpreted as coinciding with what it itself constitutes. By virtue of this intertwining of the subject with the thought object, we can question whether it can be possible for the I think to no longer put itself in front of the thinkable, or to erase itself in front of the thinkable. In this respect, the notion of interiorization comes to the fore as a possible escape valve for the marks of the thinking self in the face of the thought.

Conscience, however, glimpses such a possibility in different ways. An alternative would be through "words", these, in turn, are signs that consciousness itself gives to itself. Another possibility would be to try to look for a meaning beyond what is immediately presented to consciousness. However, through the inner discourse of questioning and searching for answers, there is a reflection on oneself that still proceeds from the I think. Even in these exercises around interiorization, in the attempt to deviate from intentionality, this continues as the keynote of the return to oneself. It must be considered, in any case, that in the apparent permanence in itself, the element of language becomes a relevant point of discussion in Levinas' philosophy, since it circulates as part of the multiplicity of minds. It is true that knowledge would still control it, because "it consists, for each of the interlocutors, in entering into the other's thinking" (LEVINAS, 2002).

Now, in entering into the thought of the other, reason prevails and becomes the background for the "inner speech". And in this supposed "dialogue" between subjects who seek to encompass each other, the exchange of ideas is truly effected in a single consciousness. Such coincidence, originating in reason, also rests on the attempt to establish peace among people by unanimity. This feat, however, only becomes achievable under the power of domination that apprehends the other, or the knowledge of the latter as a thing, without distinction in the face of all that is. The role of language in the process of building peace, according to Levinas, is in its lead to reason. And despite the meeting of "I's" supported by reason, the dialogue does not fail to indicate the possibility of rupture in the game of assimilations waged between the subjects. That is why Levinas' questioning makes sense when analyzing whether truth, related to the search for peace among people, could not find another way, such as in the dialogue of the self and the other (even without the destitution of the sovereignty of the self under the tonic of common truth). However, how to bring to dialogue opposite beings willing to do violence?

It seems, however, that without a dialogue that precedes totalizing reason, in its activity that completes knowledge and emphasizes the "I-It" to the detriment of the "I-Thou", the Self itself finds it difficult to be reborn. This is because intersubjectivity, so to speak, still according to Husserl's perception, shows itself as a formulation that subordinates language to knowledge. From then on, communication would be born from the "signs of language", which, from the intentional consciousnesses of beings (in which the consciousness that each consciousness has about something is known), the "expressive manifestations of the signifying bodies in the presentation" are formed (LEVINAS, 2002). In other words, language would be born from the presentation that is at the same time the experience of the thinking "I" and the reading of the sign. Now, consciousnesses recognizing each other, as mentioned above, and communicating with each other, do not cease to be guided by knowledge, following the idea of intersubjectivity expressed in Husserl. If intentional consciousnesses look at something and formulate a concept capable of placing the essence of something in the concept and this being a common truth for such consciousnesses, knowledge is still the priority in the supposed dialogue, which is a paradigm for the relationship.

Now, the step achieved by active consciousness, in Husserl's considerations, founds "on the side of the self, a habituality of continuous validation, which now belongs to the constitution of objects for the self" (HUSSERL, 2013). At the stage in which consciousness is structured as intentionality, it rests, as Levinas points out, in another modality that suggests an awareness of oneself. This awareness cannot be confused with an internal perception that makes objects recover in a reflective act. But it is precisely from the active consciousness, in its addressing to the world, that the unintentional accompanies it. It is through this path that Levinas intends to deprive the subject of intentionality and put down his sovereignty, in his return to himself through intentionality.

## NON-INTENTIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

The reference to oneself, which marks the understanding of subjectivity in the modern period, is still an element present in Husserl's philosophy. For Levinas, Husserl's work, despite being impactful and revolutionary, follows the traditional trends of Western philosophy, with regard to the ontological sense of being and its predominance. Self-centeredness reappears especially in the Husserlian notion of pure consciousness. Levinas, in turn, does not fully depart from phenomenology to reflect on his main concern in philosophy, which is the theme of alterity. On the contrary, the liberation itself from the predominance of the self, from the awakening of the subjectivity of the one-to-the-other, is

related to the influences received by Husserl, although Levinas reflects the awakening to the other, in view of aspects not deepened by the German philosopher.

Certainly, the Husserlian way is not the only one proposed by Levinas to deal with subjectivity. But it is possible to consider, from his thesis of non-intentional consciousness, a phenomenological correction that intends to divert phenomenology from its ontological destiny, in order to later suggest the moment in which subjectivity is transformed under the notion of moral consciousness, which is constituted by non-intentional consciousness. To this end, the notion of intentionality, analyzed by Husserl, serves Levinas as a model, from which non-intentionality is discussed. Now, this is part of the intentional acts of people because conscience is not conscious of all its voluntary acts.

In the article "Is ontology fundamental?", written in 1951, the French philosopher questions whether our acts are pure, if when thinking about doing something, such as reaching out to bring a chair closer, other traces are left. The maxim that there is no perfect crime immediately comes to the fore because it is adjacent to human intention, unintentional marks. Hence, in the midst of our intentional acts, we become responsible beyond our intentions. It is important to note how already in this article the French philosopher surrounds the notion of responsibility for the other, as something close to intentionality that brings non-intentionality in its core.

In order to understand how Levinas articulates his thesis, based on Husserl's phenomenology, it is important to pay attention to the way he presents the object and its access to consciousness:

In any case, every construction of the activity necessarily presupposes, however, as a lower degree, a pre-giving passivity, and, regressing in this activity, we finally strike upon the constitution through passive genesis. That which in life, so to speak, appears to us as an already finished existing thing (apart from all the spiritual characters which make it known, such as a hammer, a table, an aesthetic creation) is given in the originality of itself in the synthesis of passive experience. As such, it is pre-given for spiritual activities, which begin with active capture. (HUSSERL, 2013, p.177)

In their mode of access to consciousness, the constitutive genesis of objects is distinguished into active and passive forms (DEPRAZ, 2007). In active genesis, it is the intentional acts of consciousness that form objectivity and its meaning. There is, however, a pre-bestowal layer adjacent to this active activity of consciousness. Husserl calls it passive, and it is this that offers, at first, the matter from which the active part will unfold. If "the finished thing," like a hammer, comes to active consciousness, it is in passive consciousness that this object in its originality offers itself. Passive synthesis is always on the march in providing the matter for the grasp of active consciousness. And in this way, the



passive pre-data does not cease to appear, despite undergoing modifications by the captures. In any case, it is important to highlight that even present in the activities of the active consciousness, the passive element does not present itself as such. This still does not escape, retrospectively, intentionality, in Husserl's thought.

Levinas' thesis of unintentional consciousness stems exactly from Husserl's insight regarding the rapid change from the unintentional to the intentional. There is for Levinas a positive meaning in the secrecy inherent in unintentional consciousness. It is not a resolution that is based on knowledge, as this is related to active consciousness, that is, exposure to apprehension and capture. In turn, unintentional consciousness takes away this hegemony from the subject, because the thought that remains in the passivity of intentional consciousness is faced with something that it cannot apprehend or grasp. That is, the presence of oneself to oneself in the unintentional consciousness is dethroned from its power of appropriation. Non-intentionality is before all willing, it is before all lack (LEVINAS, 2010)

The passivity of the unintentional, in its spontaneity, calls into question the position of hegemony of the being with intentional thought that has the domain and exposure for capture and apprehension. But not only that. The subject is also questioned in his right to be: To have "to answer for his right to be, not by reference to the abstraction of some anonymous law, of some legal entity, but in fear for others" (LEVINAS, 2010)

## SUBJECTIVITY FROM UNINTENTIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The concept of subjectivity is important in Levinas because of its ability to go beyond the anonymity of being. We have noticed so far, however, that the autonomous and conscious Self does not represent the definitive overcoming of the neutrality that always ends up returning and preventing the distinction between interior and exterior, or between subject and object, causing the meaning of one-to-the-other to be absorbed and swallowed up by the neutrality of the impersonal being. In this I-it relationship, knowledge is at the base, and the apprehension of the game of thematization is not escaped from it. The construction of passive subjectivity in Levinas implies the fundamental word I-thou, escapes, therefore, the exclusive predominance of ontology, since it is the restlessness of the Same for the Other that breaks neutrality and anonymity. The Other, in this way, is alterity that calls into question blind fidelity to essence.

In total agreement with the unintentional consciousness, or through bad conscience, the previous experience of another is not necessary for the self to be able to challenge him to dialogue. The very meaning of tu, according to Levinas, does not derive from this same



experience either. Questioning the other is an event of the spirit, transcendence would be achieved beyond the knowledge filled by the world and in the world; On the other hand, a bad conscience is a suffering of positivity because it needs to respond to others. Non-intentionality has an impact on subjectivity, as it is undressed, dislodged, to the point that its self-assurance is compromised: its theses and theories lose their meaning, the absolutely other is responsible for breaking and implying a response (SUSIN, 1984). That is why the French philosopher insists on arguing that encounter and sociality are not the same thing as experience encompassed by intentionality, since they can be conceptualized by reason.

The crack that does not open intentionality, so to speak, evidences an extraordinary passage that surpasses any synthesis of the I think, and this would not be able to equal this ethical event. Not even the internal discourse of the cogito could be a form of dialogue with itself because it would not consist of an interlocutor distinct from itself<sup>2</sup>. The dialogue that consciousness knows, however, does not abdicate from reflection itself; If reflection supposes the suspension of the spontaneity of thought, the other has already acted, by supposing the reflection of the "I" by the other. Such an event would not be possible, according to Levinas, without the sociality of the self with the other.

Self-consciousness is confronted with an encounter that comes before – as "a thought thought beyond the world, for self-consciousness equals itself by equaling itself with the world. There is no possibility of coincidence or synthesis in this encounter, however, as if the knowledge of one by the other were a bad aspect; it is, on the contrary, a surplus from one to the other, "the best of one besides oneself". It is no exaggeration to say that when being interspersed in the encounter with the other, the self is born beyond itself, beyond its interiority. If the other returns the self to its real and forgotten point of origin beyond ontology, this relationship that resembles love also degenerates into hatred. It is necessary to remember that the face of the other is also a temptation to murder, in addition to implying the notion of infinity. (LEVINAS, 1982)

But doesn't love as an unfolding of the encounter of the I-Thou emerge kind of submissive to the ideas and values of the environment? For Levinas, the encounter, or the dialogue with the Other, is also the dialogue of transcendence in the sense that the very notion of good emerges through the encounter with the other. This event is the ethical moment, from which all values owe everything to this ethics itself. This reciprocity of the I-Thou relationship is certainly an opposition to intentional consciousness:

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<sup>2</sup> Levinas questions whether the impulse of thought reflecting on itself, causing interruption, and returning, is not a prior dialogue.

The Phenomenology of the intentional act is juxtaposed – often taking a negative modality – as it were a phenomenology of Relation. Thus, the non-reversible "polarity" of the intentional act: ego-cogito-cogitatum, in which the ego pole is inconvertible into an objective pole, is opposed to the reversibility or reciprocity of the I-Thou: the I says you to a Thou and the latter, as I, says thou to the I; the activity of saying in dialogue is ipso facto the passivity of listening, the word in its own spontaneity exposes itself to the response [...] (LEVINAS, 2002, p. 194)

The Husserlian formula of the "ego-cogito-cogitatum", which initially starts from Descartes, is shaken by the "reciprocity of the I-Thou" that inexorably sets the dialogue into activity. The saying in dialogue is not based on the sovereignty of the thinking self and its conceptual and logical intentions. The interspersed the other points to an exercise of humility, as is subtended in the Levinasian conception of alterity. In other words, listening to the other who says to the self is an exercise that implies self-control, as it involves the control of good conscience, of the intentionality that is creative in its exercise of thinking about something, to open up to what the other says. Listening to the other involves not allowing the conscience to create reasoning by listening to what the other says. In the practice of listening, the possibility of response is implicit. The first sense of responsibility lies precisely in the moment when the other is listened to, because he or she will also be able to listen and speak again in the situation of dialogue.

Even if the encounter with the Thou takes place in the world, this other is not of the world. That is why it escapes from intentional consciousness, because it approaches the object on the horizon of the world; In other words, the other is non-being. The other is not simply made present by the cogito. A human spirituality that begins not in knowledge, in intentional consciousness, but in bad conscience becomes a different way of conceiving the human psyche, in the pure I-thou relationship. Finally, the bad conscience would be the dead point where the sovereign movement of the self, of the "ego-cogito-cogitatum", or the concern with the world more than with the other – the self, returns to its point of origin beyond ontology.

Ethics, in Levinas, begins exactly in this event, because without recourse to any general principle, the value of the other is evident. The relationship with the other implies an immediacy, an obligation, without the aid of any universal principle. Subjectivity, in this way, is awakened to insomnia and, at the same time, it is a restlessness provoked by someone. In the relationship with the other, more precisely in dialogue, the self ends up thinking, without, however, embracing the other. This is the impact of non-intentionality on the construct of subjectivity.

## CONCLUSION

We sought to reflect on the problems intrinsic to the theme of alterity of E. Levinas, seeking to understand its phenomenological bases. It was found that the philosopher from Kaunas started from a fixture left by E. Husserl to expose the ethical moment in which the sovereignty of the "I think" gives way to the Other who disconcerts him. This possibility directly involves the thesis of unintentional consciousness, whose resistance to intellectual understanding represents a disarticulating force of clear reason. Also called "bad consciousness" this underlies the intentionality of consciousness (the "good conscience"), and through it, the self returns to its point of origin beyond ontology.

A bad conscience is the suffering of the positivity of having to answer for someone. It reduces the self, at the same time that it gives birth beyond itself, beyond its interiority and its relationship with the world. By unintentionality, the self has to answer a question that goes beyond it. In other words, it is the bad conscience that causes the suffering imposed from outside, because the Other is not encompassed by intentionality as a mere object: it is the face that cries out for dialogue. Exactly where alterity is transformative.

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