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THE ROLE OF OTHERNESS IN INTERPERSONAL DIALOGUE

Content: 1. The Alien As That Which Surprises and Which Is Sought; 2. My Acceptance of Otherness and Various Ways of Experiencing It; 3. Conclusion.

The issue of otherness or foreignness is one of the most important concepts in contemporary philosophy. It cannot possibly be left out of any discussion of dialogue or communication in the European Community. When communicating with others, we keep encountering that which appears to us as entirely different, alien. It would be a platitude to say one cannot have an identity of one's own without discerning that which is different, or foreign. On the one hand, we want to understand otherness, on the other we either suppress or try to assimilate it. I would like, however, to point out to a certain gap in discussions concerning otherness, particularly in the context of European dialogue.

The alien is described as something essentially differing from the identical, or as that which we are not used to, which surprises us, contradicts any universal approaches to reality, or as a certain wealth of existence. Thus, we talk about the claiming nature of that which is different. Many philosophers say otherness requires a response from us, demands a reaction. The alien appears to us as something active, which stimulates our personality, while we ourselves remain passive, that is, respond to a call coming from that which is different and which stimulates us to take appropriate action. It appears, however, that such approach to the phenomenon of otherness is a gross simplification. There is much proof that the subject consciously seeks that which is different, and thus becomes the active party. We listen to various kinds of music, want our meals to be varied, go to places we do not know. That which is the same appears to us as boring and tiresome. Isn't it then the case that the desire for otherness is our internal need? Isn't otherness one of the many aspects of the whole range of that which man needs to live, or which surrounds him? It thus seems to a simplification to say that our cognition aims at assimilating everything, to ultimately neutralize it and make it our own, to adopt it. Isn't there cognition for the very pleasure of learning? The basic question is: Do we seek something to assimilate and appropriate it, or rather to add variety to something else? Do I barely have to bear otherness, or do I need it perhaps? What, then, determines the moral nature of my deeds: the unfamiliarity of the other, or my desire for otherness, for variety, so that I get to know reality as best I can, develop as fully as possible, or simply acquire a more complete identity?

Furthermore, otherness, or the state of being different, must be distinguished from foreignness or hostility. A stranger may, but does not have to, be an enemy. He may be a friend. Finally, who creates foreignness: the other, or myself?

1. The Alien As That Which Surprises and Which Is Sought

The accession of new members to the European Union, migrations, the inflow of immigrants from Asiatic countries or the so called Third World, calls for the establishment of certain practical ways of coexisting and communicating with others, those we have not known so far, strangers. It also shows a theoretically philosophical reflection on that issue is necessary. Changes on the European continent have revealed two entirely differing tendencies. On the one hand, there are those for whom being a European, whatever that word should mean, is the main goal of all efforts, the most desirable thing; on the other, it is fashionable to criticize European ethno- and logocentrism. The European way of thinking is accused of being totalitarian, reflecting an ambition to rule over all. B. Waldenfels reminds us of the order Columbus received from the royal couple, Ferdinand and Isabella: "discover and conquer"¹. This saying is supposed to confirm that all cognition serves to appropriate that which is known. I have some doubts, however.

Indeed, being a European has become a symbol of that which is best: „true faith, right reason, real progress, civilized humankind, universal discourse”². Europeans have always believed that the rest of the world should, and will, Europeize, while we never think of becoming “Indianized”³. It is important to note, however, that the reaction of the Muslim world to everything that which is Western, thus also European, distinctly shows they are not willing to assimilate that which we believe to be best. That which is alien, in this case European, makes them respond with a ‘no’. Doesn’t something new emerge, however, in result of such response? Isn’t it the case that both the Arabic and the European culture become enriched, that something new is created? Moreover, even a negative response does not mean they do not feel like, often despite themselves, to get to know that which they are not familiar with, even just in order to assimilate that which appears to be attractive, useful. The Muslims do not want to give up that which is theirs, which does not mean they do not want to get to know that which is different.

The example of persons converting to Islam or starting to practice Buddhism clearly shows that otherness may be attractive, it may even induce one to abandon that which so far has been considered one’s own. A similar process takes place in the opposite direction. Muslims convert to Christianity. They choose to embrace that which is different. It does not matter to what extent such conversion is possible or how often it takes place. What matters is that the alien does not need to be a deterrent, on the contrary, it may be seen as attractive. I grow keen on learning that which

¹ B. WALDENFELS, *Topografia obcego*, Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa 2002, 146.

² *Ibidem*, 146.

³ *Ibidem*.

is alien to me, without trying to change it into my own, much less to reject or suppress it⁴.

Those who travel to faraway countries to discover new things do it *sponte sua*, not just because the foreign has taken them by surprise or forced them to act. The initiative to look for that which is alien was theirs, as they have become bored with that which they know as their own. It might appear that in our discussion of foreignness we focus only on getting to know the foreign. Thus, the familiar appears as contrary to the alien. Experiencing otherness is not the same, however, as knowing about it. It appears that a strive for diversity and otherness is inherently present in man, though it is expressed in every person to a different degree. Thus, we talk about open-mindedness and narrow-mindedness. Our inborn predispositions to a large extent determine whether we will content ourselves with that which we already know, or strive to discover that which is different, which adds to our perception of the world and the way we experience it. Indeed, one can enjoy that which is different without a desire to assimilate it, to make it one's own. Looking at a tightrope walker in a circus, I can see he is a different person, different from myself. I could not do what he does and I do not intend to imitate him, but neither am I going to oppose him because of his otherness. I am happy to go to a circus and happy to see that he can walk a line high above the ground. The same applies to watching films, or listening to music. If all artists appearing on stage sang the same song exactly in the same way, no one would want to stay till the end of the concert.

Waldenfels is right in saying that Europe cannot keep focusing on itself only. This would result in the emergence of what many refer to as "supranationalism", a certain artificial form, especially if it were to be created by theoreticians or bureaucrats, cut off from real life, especially life which is experienced, and not only learned about, in which that which is different (alien) calls, appeals, forces one to take an appropriate stance, destroys the old patterns of thought or action. It is for this reason that Brussels so often finds it difficult to understand the reasoning and actions taken by its new member states. At the same time, however, it is something to be sought, as it supplements that which is familiar, which has been known so far. That which is our own is, by definition, somehow limited, incomplete. On the other hand, however, man cannot only do the bidding of that which is totally unfamiliar. Too much otherness baffles us, makes us experience a trauma. Lévinas was not entirely right when he said another person is totally unlike me, that he or she is radically different. That, however, is another matter, which I will not dwell upon here.

Waldenfels is right to point out that even our own sources appear alien to us. A typical example is the name we have been given. We may come to like it, or determine to change it. It was not ours to choose, however. Others did it for us. The same, he believes, applies to Europe as a whole. We may ask when it was created. What are its roots? The here and now of each generation living in it was preceded by the past of those who lived there before. We all benefit from the work of earlier generations. Those who lived before us took over that which they had not created themselves, which was

⁴ Por. K. A. APPIAH, *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in the World Strangers*, New York, NY : W. Norton & Co. 2006.

not theirs to make (religion, customs, households). Already Husserl recognized it when he talked about primary and secondary historicity; for he was convinced we could never achieve a community of souls⁵.

While talking about the alien, we must notice that foreignness is not defined as a mere opposite of familiarity. There are many grades and styles to foreignness. It appears on a certain horizon of vision, depends on time and place. Foreignness as such does not exist. This can be easily observed on the example of who a Kashubian or a Silesian feels to be, of what and when he finds alien, or foreign: Małopolska as a neighbouring region, Poland, Russia where he went for a trip, Asia? A certain gradation could be applied here, depending on the point of reference.

There is no foreignness as such. It is always relative to that which is familiar, but also to that which is concrete. We live in many concrete communities: a state, a family, a company, a religious community. These worlds sometimes intersect; in none of them, however, do we feel completely at home. There is always something alien in each of them. Those who are treated as fellows in some respects, are strangers in others. Nationality or profession are not the only decisive factors. When familiarity or foreignness is treated in universal terms, it is easy to put labels on others, to call them strangers. When the question: Who is a stranger? is made more specific, it turns out a stranger can sometimes be a fellow. For example, a physician who is a foreigner and who takes care of me in hospital is closer to me than my neighbour, who does not care about me, who I have nothing to do with, who never visits me and vice versa.

The alien cannot be reduced only to that which is negative, unfamiliar. The unknown may be assimilated, and thus become familiar. Once we get to know and understand something, it will become ours. No wonder some theologians say once we understand something, it will no longer be God⁶.

Foreignness is ambivalent by nature, however, as Waldenfels has been right to point out. „The alien we encounter both frightens and tempts us. The closer it comes, the more uncanny it appears”⁷. Saying that the alien tempts us is very interesting. It shows that the alien may attract us, and not only because it is a potential object of assimilation. Waldenfels attempts to show, at any cost, that in the beginning there was the alien, the foreign. This line of thought is close to Derrida’s. Another of his claims appears more likely to be true, however, namely that in the beginning things were interwoven and intermingled, which opinion is shared by other thinkers, such as Elias, Plessner, Merleau-Ponty, Michail Bachtin. „In the beginning there is mixture, not purity”⁸. One can only get to know it gradually. Step by step man comes to the conclusion his life is full of encounters with the unfamiliar, that which is beyond cognition, a surplus to that which can be known. Consequently, man goes out to meet that which can be assimilated, aware there are things beyond his cognition, which are, however, in a harmonious

⁵ E. HUSSERL, *Kryzys europejskiego człowieczeństwa a filozofia*, przekł. częściowy, tłum. J. Sidorek, Aletheia, Warszawa 1993, 18.

⁶ B. WALDENFELS, *Topografia obcego*, *op. cit.*, 158.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 161.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 170.

unity with that which can be known, and thus add variety to life. We can therefore legitimately ask if in the beginning there was diversity (otherness), foreignness, or perhaps a desire for variety, a dislike of boredom. It thus appears that foreignness motivates us to act, and a desire for variety makes us go out towards the alien.

2. My Acceptance of Otherness and Various Ways of Experiencing It

There is one more thing to consider. Isn't it the case that our feelings and attitudes towards the alien depend to a large extent on ourselves, on our personality? Even straightforward observation of human behaviour, especially that of young children, shows that foreignness is something we also create ourselves. It turns out some children are more apprehensive of the alien than others, and the same applies to adults. There are people who do not find it difficult to adapt to the alien, in a way making it their own; others cannot do that. The ability to adapt and feel at home in a foreign country is different in each person, which can be observed, for example, when talking to Poles who have gone abroad to work, or to change the country to a "more civilized" one. This, after all, is often the way they explain their decision to emigrate. Their ability to adapt is very different, however. Some feel at home in a new (foreign) country very quickly, others find it extremely difficult. In each case, there is always a certain sphere of that which remains entirely strange. Moreover, everyone is a stranger to oneself, to a greater or lesser degree.

Man may feel alienated, but may also alienate himself. As Karol Wojtyla repeatedly said, alienation takes place not only because unjust social relations or the relations of production exist, as Marx believed, but because man does not participate in the life of the community, does not want to consciously take part in its life and together strive for the common good. The same conclusions, though from an entirely different perspective, were arrived at by J.P. Sartre. He said it was up to us alone who we really felt, whether we would treat ourselves as an object, seen through the eyes of others, or a subject taking responsibility for him or herself. Sartre was perfectly aware there existed a certain kind of otherness, particularly resistant to being reduced to the neutral, and that was another person, as that person was free. Everyone discovers that we are surrounded by meanings which have not been created by ourselves, which are alien to us. We meet another person as a raw fact. But we have two possibilities of treating the other person – as a subject, or as an object. If we choose the first option, we will reinforce our freedom; if we treat the other person as an object, we will also have to recognize ourselves as a free transcendence without quality⁹. Man, however, never treats himself the way others treat him. Sartre believed that treating myself as others treat me means contenting myself with the most basic projections of myself. I can be a total stranger to someone, but it is up to me whether I will try to be to myself what I am to others, or not. I can be a bad person to someone, but not consider myself to be one. Whether or not that conviction will be sustained depends on me, on my consent or objection to it. Or, to put it differently, the way I am treated by others de-

⁹ J.P. SARTRE, *L' être et le néant*, Paris 1955, 34.

pendes also on myself, on my consent to being treated like that, on how much I want to uphold my otherness.

The issue of foreignness is related to judgment, valuation. It is not only the case that we discover the alien as something that exists, that appears to us. Experiencing foreignness or looking for it, we value it as well. It appears to us as something bad or good; more often than not as something bad, something which threatens us, bothers us, and frightens. Foreignness may, however, appear to us as something which intrigues us – we can see that, leaving aside all discussions concerning the historicity of these events, in the otherness of the tree of Eden, which Adam and Eve found attractive, which intrigued, indeed, which tempted them. And so they picked the forbidden fruit, even though they could have remained indifferent to it or refrained from picking it in the fear of bad consequences, and stayed away from it.

It seems that in discussions concerning otherness (the foreign) we automatically pass certain judgments, while the alien in fact is only one of the dimensions of existence, and may be relational, for instance like right – left, or lower – upper. Valuation is a secondary issue. The problem of otherness (the foreign) looks different on the epistemological or political plane and different on the ontological plane.

On the ontological plane, otherness is a variety of the ways of existence, its component. On the plane of cognition or action, however, the situation is entirely different. Here there is a temptation to neutralize everything, or annihilate the alien. In this context it should be noted that the fashionable accusations of European philosophy with ethno- or logocentrism are much exaggerated. The fact is Europe witnessed the outbreak of two world wars; it was here Holocaust happened; it was here that which was different was to be eliminated in the name of the purity of race or class. It does not mean in other parts of the world similar atrocities did not happen, or that they were less effectively perpetrated; they were not done in the name of reason or common good, however, which European philosophy is charged with. One need just think of Cambodia, Ruanda, North Korea. In the name of caste membership (i.e. something different, alien to each of the other castes), man is left to his own resources, because he is a stranger. He is not done away with, or removed, but left on his own. Is this better? An affirmative answer would be hard to give.

Today's popular and fashionable efforts aimed at creating regions in Europe, which are smaller, more autonomous, not subordinated to the whole, is certainly an attempt both justified and naive. As Waldenfels points out, not only such regimes as that of Hitler or Stalin were aimed at centralization. The same applies to liberal regimes, „which settle for majorities, or partial wholes. There is a risk, after all, that metropolises, high cultures, uniform languages, technical standards and consumer norms will have an equalizing effect. Preferences and diversification may, in the end, merge in indifference which eliminates all variety. The western form of *functionalization* would then become a soft, flexible equivalent of the hard forms of *totalizations* which fell apart before our very eyes¹⁰.

¹⁰ B. WALDENFELS, *Topografia obcego, op. cit.*, 175.

3. Conclusion

The above discussion has demonstrated that foreignness must not only be treated as something which imposes itself upon us and demands a response, the taking of a certain stance. It has a different expression on the ontological plane, and different on the epistemological or ethical one. The alien which is experienced differs fundamentally from that which is learned about. Waldenfels is certainly right in saying it is something that originates "in between", and the initiative may just as well be mine, not only that of the other. Foreignness may be defined beginning either with oneself, or with that which is alien. Both learning about and experiencing the alien depends to a large extent on the learning and acting subject. The same thing may be more or less foreign to two different persons. Foreignness is sometimes an unpleasant necessity, at other times it may be something one needs and finds attractive, even something which awakens desires that are difficult to suppress. I can be a stranger to myself, another person may be a stranger, even human conscience can be a stranger, as P. Ricoeur aptly says. Failure to notice and acknowledge that may be very dangerous, as it may lead to the creation of a new form of a softer, but nevertheless a totalitarianism.

ROLA OBCOŚCI W DIALOGU MIĘDZYOSOBOWYM

Streszczenie

Artykuł ten traktuje o obcości widzianej w perspektywie jednoczącej się Europy. Obcość opisuje się jako coś, co różni się zasadniczo od tożsamości lub jako to, do czego nie jesteśmy przyzwyczajeni, jako coś, co zaskakuje, sprzeciwia się wszelkim całościowym ujęciom rzeczywistości, bądź jako pewne bogactwo bycia. W związku z tym mówi się o rozszczeniowym charakterze tego, co inne. Wydaje się jednak, że takie pojmowanie fenomenu inności jest wielkim uproszczeniem. Wiele bowiem wskazuje na to, że podmiot świadomie szuka tego, co inne. Wejście nowych krajów do Unii Europejskiej, migracja ludności, napływ imigrantów z krajów azjatyckich czy tzw. trzeciego świata domaga się ustalenia pewnych praktycznych sposobów istnienia razem z innymi i porozumiewania, dotychczas nieznanymi, obcymi. Doświadczając inności albo jej poszukując, dokonujemy jednocześnie wartościowania. Jawi się nam ona jako coś złego lub dobrego; częściej złego niż dobrego, jako coś, co nam zagraża, niepokoi, budzi obawy. Na ile jest ono słuszne?

Słowa kluczowe: dialog międzyosobowy, obcość, Unia europejska.

Keywords: Otherness, interpersonal dialogue, European Union.