



THE ENCOUNTER AS THE PRIMARY TASK OF PHENOMENOLOGY. RECIPROCITY AND INEQUALITY IN BUYTENDIJK*

O encontro como tarefa primeira da fenomenologia. Reciprocidade e desigualdade em Buytendijk

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Lo encuentro como tarea primordial la fenomenologia. Reciprocidad y desigualdad em Buytendijk.

Abstract: The paper present and discuss F. J. J. Buytendijk's essay Phenomenology of Encounter. Initially, we briefly situate the relevance off the problem of encounter on phenomenology, taking Husserl and Lévinas as opposite parameters. We will see that Buytendijk himself make use of numerous authors from phenomenology as key pieces to the composition of the essay, such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Binswanger. Next, we try to explicit in his essay the question of encounter based on four topics: the place of encounter, which has an existential character engaged on historical and social context; ambiguity, as the essential mark of the encounter; reciprocity, as the condition of encounter, most of the time ia a situation of inequality, highlighting the question of social roles; and its balance to phenomenology, in which the encounter isn't a subject among others, but the starting point to the phenomenology and interrogation of our own experiences. Finally, we end with questions and final considerations, with which we seek to assume Buytendijk's essay legacy for ourselves.

Keywords: Buytendijk; encounter; phenomenology; relationship with other; otherness.

Resumo: O artigo apresenta e discute o ensaio Fenomenologia do Encontro, de F. J. J. Buytendijk. Inicialmente, situamos, brevemente, a relevância do problema do encontro na fenomenologia, tomando, como parâmetros opostos Husserl e Lévinas. Ver-se-á, no artigo, que o próprio Buytendijk se serve de vários autores da fenomenologia enquanto peças chave para a composição do ensaio, entre os quais Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty e Binswanger. A seguir, buscamos explicitar, no ensaio do autor, a questão do encontro em quatro tópicos: o lugar do encontro, de caráter existencial engajado ao contexto histórico e social; a ambigüidade, como marca essencial do encontro; a reciprocidade, como condição do encontro, no mais das vezes em situação de desigualdade, com destaque para a questão dos papéis sociais; e seu saldo para a fenomenologia, no qual o encontro não é um assunto entre outros, mas ponto de partida para a fenomenologia e interrogação de nossas experiências. Por fim, encerramos com questões e considerações finais, com as quais procuramos assumir o legado do ensaio de Buytendijk para nós.

Palavras-chave: Buytendijk; encontro; fenomenologia; relação com o outro; alteridade.

Resumen: Este artículo presenta y discute lo ensayo fenomenología de lo encuentro, de F. J. J. Buytendijk. Inicialmente, situamos brevemente la relevancia del problema del encuentro en la fenomenología, tomando a Husserl y Lévinas como parámetros opuestos. Se verá, en el artículo, que el propio Buytendijk utiliza a varios autores de la fenomenología como piezas clave para la composición del ensayo, entre ellos Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty y Binswanger. A continuación, tratamos de hacer explícito, en el ensayo del autor, la cuestión del encuentro en cuatro temas: el lugar del encuentro, de carácter existencial comprometido en el contexto histórico y social; la ambigüedad, como rasgo esencial del encuentro; la reciprocidad, como condición del encuentro, en la mayor parte del tiempo en situaciones de desigualdad, con énfasis en el tema de los roles sociales; y su saldo para la fenomenología, en el cual el encuentro no es un tema entre otros, sino el punto de partida para la fenomenología y para lo interrogatorio de nuestras vivencias. Finalmente, terminamos con preguntas y consideraciones finales, con las que buscamos asumir el legado del ensayo de Buytendijk para nosotros.

Palavras-clave: Buytendijk; encuentro; relacion com lo outro; alteridade.

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The problem of encounter

Beyond all its propositions concerning the theory of knowledge, the phenomenological motto – “to the things themselves” – also seems to have put the problem of Other back into philosophy. For just as the meaning of a wide range of objectivities comes to be considered in its own manifestation, in “flesh and blood” as it is said, the existence of other subjectivities and their otherness is also replaced in the scope of its manifestation and in its carnal presence. With the *Leibhaftigkeit*'s conception of the presence of things and of others, phenomenology has sought since its beginning to overcome solipsism that haunts the philosophies of consciousness. After all, how could it be possible to get out of myself and find another, another “I” at the same time different from me? Well, this question can also be marked as the question of the possibility of the “encounter”: how is it possible to have an encounter, in particular with the other?

In a brief but crucial incursion to the speech of Van Breda in the famous “Husserl Royaumont Colloquium” (1957), Jean Hyppolite asked if this experience of the encounter does not presuppose a pre-understanding of what will be found; and conversely, if all understanding does not, in turn, presuppose an encounter with something. Notable since at least Plato, in *Menon*, the circularity of the argument seems to attest to the effectiveness of phenomenology when it restricts the being of the other to its manifestation – reestablishing all the charm and horror in things, as Sartre writes (1947, p. 32) –, and at the same time compromise this effectiveness, since there seems to be an inherent difficulty in avoiding this pre-understanding of the immediate presence of the other, a condition for the reception to be worthy of an “otherness”.

Let us take the dimension of the problem. The encounter with the transcendence and otherness must rest beyond what I already understand for the other to be truly “other”. But at the same time there seems to be a limit to this transcendence or otherness, insofar as to find it I need to recognize it as such; i.e., understand it in a certain sense, which makes it, therefore, part of me or of my world. In this respect the question of otherness, relaunched by phenomenology, seems to be the most difficult both for the phenomenological approach and for human understanding in general.

First, we can ask if this other existence that appears at the contact border or in the perceptual field is beyond the border, as a completely unknown, non-phenomenological foreigner, or if it is prepared at the border, as a horizon or background of my conscious experience, which then has a fundamentally intersubjective dimension.

In short, the question again is whether other is anticipated, and there is only an encounter with what is already understood and recognized to some extent, or if he is not anticipated, but then I could never find him since I would not be able to understand, recognize and even describe him. “Who” is at the same time in this face that I contemplate and beyond it? After all, “who” talks, writes and thinks with me? Do I not write alone?

The problem seems to be faced primarily in Husserl's phenomenology, especially in his *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*. There, the author approaches the other within the limits of his appearance, since it is only within these limits that he obtains a meaning for me, in the lived experience I obtain from him.

The next question necessarily arises – how can it be that my Ego, within his own being, can somehow constitute “the other” “just as being foreign to him”, i.e., give him an existential meaning that puts it outside the concrete content of the concrete “self” that constitutes it. This concerns immediately not only all alter ego, but then everything that, in its existential sense, implies an alter ego; in short, the objective world, in the full sense of the term” (Husserl, 1953, §44, p. 78-79).

Just as the past only makes sense as a “retained” past from the present, the other only appears as another for me, as “another me” (alter ego). In a sense, this would overcome solipsism as the thesis of the sole existence or self and its states of consciousness. For when subjectivity thinks what is proper to it, reducing itself to its sphere of belonging and abstracting everything that is alien or even unnecessary (location, date, culture, vesture, etc.), the other is still there, persistent, within the perceptual sphere, as a “stranger” [*fremd*] who is also a “familiar”. Like an “other me”, just like “me”. Therefore, the first contact occurs through “empathy” [*Einfühlung*] in which I recognize in other's body and behavior the possibilities of conduct and intentions that are proper to me. As Merleau-Ponty later will write, life seems to be lived at every moment there, in that body I see and touch. I realize in the other what could be my intentions. I notice that he can do what I can, that he can see what I see or what I could see. The encounter takes place.

But, just as there is no past completely past, immemorial, there is no other completely different, inaccessible to me. He has to be accessible by description and, to a certain extent, its otherness can only appear within the limits of its manifestation. The other is another “I”: “Admitting that it is in me that others are constituted while others is the only way to understand that they could have for me the meaning and value of existences and of determined existences” (Husserl, 1953, § 56, p. 109).

In contrast, for Lévinas the other deserves this designation only if he exceeds all possible manifestation for me; if he is invisible, we could say. In this condition, he definitely goes beyond the acts by which I apprehend him and beyond the experiences I have of him. He is the infinite itself, in the sense that I recognize the greatness and indeterminacy of his life, but never being able to understand and determine it. He always



remains external, and phenomenology must account for this exteriority.

In this perspective the transcendence of other is not correlate to the immanence of consciousness, as in the case of Husserl, but definitely surpasses it. An alterity so radical that it surrounds the phenomenological field from the exterior and give shape to my own world (to the economy of my “interiority”, as Lévinas writes). He is no longer accessible by description, but only by ethical action – it is impossible to say “who” or “what” the other is, I can only act on him. This exchange of the primacy of description for that of ethics leads us to think that the encounter is not a theme neither of ontology nor of phenomenology, but of Ethics as first philosophy. For I can’t know the other, he is not an object of knowledge; he doesn’t have to “be” something in the ontological sense of the word, since we do not share the same reality or the same fundamental property. He is anarchic and I can only assume his otherness as an absolute fact, I can only act in relation to him, based on ethical and non-epistemic predicates. The encounter here is lived as desire, love, learning and affection, but not known.

In one case (Husserl) the other is before the border, in other (Lévinas) he is beyond. In one case, properly speaking, there is understanding without encounter; on the other, encounter without understanding. Is there a way to safeguard understanding and encounter together, thus making a phenomenology that is appropriate to it? F. Buytendijk’s *Phenomenology of the Encounter* seems to be this attempt, which we will discuss from now on. The essay is an attempt to approach a theme which seem to challenge the possibility of thinking conceptually about its unity, since it is quite complex in its foundations and in its innumerable empirical variations. Besides that, the text seems to have an unfinished, procedural and experimental character, rather representing an invitation to proceed its discussion, which we hope to do highlighting its current relevance and as an introduction to him.

The place of encounter

The essay *Phenomenology of the Encounter* examines the modes of appearance and the modalities of encounter in order to expose its genesis in reciprocity and love. There we learn that the proper meaning of the encounter is to start a relationship with our own existence in the world, so that it rests as the human event in general (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 8). Buytendijk warns that it is through the body that this encounter with the world, with ourselves and with the other begins, since “the body of each one, as a mediation of his being in the world and the situation of his own existence, produces encounters and projects. It is in these projects of his body that man realizes his presence for others and for himself” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 36). In this centralization of the encounters around the proper body, we can notice that the author already takes distance in relation to the classic paradigm of phenomenology, according to which consciousness is the central operator of these relationships. Thus, instead of transcendental subjectivity and its realization in intersubjectivity, as we already had the opportunity to observe in Husserl, Buytendijk chooses existence and perceptual coexistence, with a series of authors, from Heidegger to Binswanger, passing through Marcel and Merleau-Ponty, according to which the *condition* of the encounter is reciprocity, and its *effectuation* takes place in the body.

The theoretical model adopted since the beginning of the text (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 10-11) approaches existential phenomenology and moves away from transcendental phenomenology. This means, to say the least, that Buytendijk does not accompany here the proposal for a transcendental constitution of the meaning of our experiences, which aims to distinguish between the order of facticity and the order of essence, with “the great task to elaborate an eidetics of the life world” (Husserl, 1976, §36, p. 144), as Husserl will write until his last texts. If this were the case, the encounter would be one of the indexes of a path that subjectivity is capable of taking, recognizing there the essential acts of its constitution. We would be able to grasp the “essence” or “generality” of the encounters, which coordinates their contingency and uniqueness. We would reduce the existence of the other to its meaning. That is why Buytendijk warns, this time in the very end of his essay, that it is impossible to satisfy a phenomenology of the encounter with all its essential modalities and their respective common fields of habitation. It is about unveiling the meaning of the encounter in the encounter itself, whether in the joy of reciprocity, in the drama of mismatch, or even in the nostalgia for reunion, “because each social relationship constitutes at the same time, although not always in the first place, an encounter modality” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 47).

Thus, the meeting place is par excellence contingency and existence, not consciousness as a transcendental subject. As long as phenomenology is understood in this existential key, approaching the encounter ends up being a source for phenomenological knowledge, for the encounter allows to understand “the significant structure of intentional acts” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 40); and also, the knowledge of the so-called psychological experiences. “A phenomenology of the encounter must come from understanding this relationship between man and his body” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 39); although we know that each one has his personal sphere of experience, his individual history with all the values belonging to the community in which he lives. Therefore, this must be taken into account when talking about the encounter: the fact that we are together with the other, but with our personal history, part of the culture to which we belong, and in the movement of a collective history and memory. As we will see, on the one hand, this historical and cultural context in which we find ourselves conditions (favoring, limiting or even preventing) our meetings, but, on the other, there is



no meeting without “heart” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 16), term by which Buytendijk refers to the transcendental condition of every possible encounter. That is why our historical and cultural context can even be an invitation to meet the other, a call waiting for an answer. Let us first analyze this mode of bodily access to the other in order to finally unfold the transcendental significance of the encounter.

Ambiguity of encounter

We said that the encounter takes place in the body: first in childhood, through the encounter between the child’s and the mother’s body, and through children’s play; second already in adulthood, where “each person has his own world and his own subjectivity” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 35), when the encounter between his own body and the body of another finally realizes our being. We can note that there is already a descriptive clause, according to which the so-called “authentic” encounters are always between humans, being forbidden or denied to animals (Buytendijk, 1952, pp. 30; 41). The condition for the encounter in human encounters is the perception of its existence. There is no such thing as an animal encounter, for Buytendijk, just as he prefers the term “frequentation” when it concerns to our relations with the things of the world (p. 22). After all, why? Because in the authentic encounter the ambiguity of existence manifests itself, as the crucial characteristic of human existence; or as the movement of transcendence, where we become what we are not yet and stop being what we already are. The human body manifests this ambiguity, through which this body it is “mine” and, at the same time, I “am” this body. Conversely, that the other is “in” his body – in another body – and “is” his body – another body.

This ambiguity between the familiar and the strange is also described by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, where we witness the unfolding of an intentional conception of perception and motricity, which will be recovered by Buytendijk. Every perceptual theme or state of affairs is correlated with a certain nascent conduct of the body, which makes it a *natural self* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 199) and the perceived world the place of encounter and coexistence. Even before communication or explicit confrontation between different perspectives, each perceptual theme is already shared by a common subject – the body – and in a common environment – the sensitive world. When Buytendijk writes that “in concrete existence each perception of objects, in its indissoluble connection with deliberate movement, takes place [...] only from a productive encounter between man and his surrounding world” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 20), this could be corroborated by Merleau-Ponty, when he also shows that “before anyone else, the thing performs this miracle of expression” from which it “is given to us ‘in person’ or ‘in flesh and bone’” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 369). There is a reciprocity in perception, of those who feel or see and of what is felt or seen; and here Buytendijk directly quotes Merleau-Ponty: “in order to perceive things, we must live them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 376).

It should be noted that perception is a first initiation into the world and also to the encounter because it has this advantage of opening me to what I “am not” (Merleau-Ponty, 1948, p.165). At the same time, the perceptive subject as the body anticipates and does not know what he is encountering. For the sensitive world must be somewhat familiar to the body, without which there would be no encounter between them, and it must also remain at some extent strange to the body, without which the body would not even be impelled to meet it. The body must know and at the same time ignore what it knows; he is an accomplice of everything that can appear in the perceptual field, but he is a victim and just receives a perceptual logic of which he is not the author. This ambiguity makes him the subject of perception in Merleau-Ponty, and allows to conceive him as the subject of the encounter in Buytendijk, as it forces the traditional concept of subjectivity to the limit, pulling it out of its self-absorbed refuge in order to take it elsewhere, to other values, behaviors or emotions; in the end, to the otherness that until was ignored or not known.

As for consciousness, it has to be conceived, no longer as a constituting consciousness and, as it were, a pure being-for-itself, but as a perceptual consciousness, as the subject of a pattern of behavior, as being-in-the-world or existence, for only thus can another appear at the top of his phenomenal body, and be endowed with a sort of “locality”. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 404).

Thus, ambiguity is fundamental to the encounter and functions more as a bridge than as an abyss between us. We apprehend in the other body the presence of one absent, of another. But we also apprehend in this absence of the other, his possible presence that surrounds and haunts us at every moment of our encounter with things. The other is absence, because I ignore his life and his world, but he is also presence, because I only ignore him because I recognize that he is as another subject. The others are a promise of a common home, but also the possibility of an imminent conflict. After all, the recognition of the same home can be sometimes treacherous, while the imminence of conflict can may be the learning from the difference of the other. The ambiguity between recognition and ignorance defines the encounter, which leads to an overcoming of the criticism suggested by Hyppolite at the beginning of this essay. For Buytendijk, the experience of the encounter is “insecurity in familiarity, alienation in presence, obscurity in revelation, emptiness in fullness” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 36). So that others are never completely in their presence, as well as things, which also need to be lived in an ambiguity due to their unfinished perspective. The other is always in becoming, but, contrary to what



it may seem, this does not reveal a difficulty in principle, but the very possibility that we may find the alterity of that person, at the same time present and absent, to become, in a “becoming that [he] is” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 38).

In this sense, the phenomenon of imitation stands out in the essay (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 32-34), with a concrete participation in the case of animals that culminates in the false encounter between them, according to the author, and with an abstract participation in the case human, because in this case “I *am* not only my body but I *have* my body” (the terms “concrete” and “abstract” we take from Merleau-Ponty, which fit perfectly to explain this passage in the essay). This ambiguity will reappear ahead: “by your body and in your body” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 40), as we have already said.

Through the phenomenon of imitation Buytendijk explores the transitivity between the behavior of the other and mine, more precisely, between his body and mine, and emphasize the possibility of communion and mixing of our lives, just as he will do with the phenomenon of dialogue, in which, quoting Merleau-Ponty himself, he states that I and the other form a system in which we think together through words, gestures and intonations (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 44).

In this context, the notion of body schema emerges, emphasizing the importance of the other to fill the opening and incompleteness of my own body or subjectivity (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 33-34). Now, the position about the relations between subjectivity and the world and, hence, with otherness, passes through a reform of the very notion of subjectivity; no longer a psychism distinct from the physiological, but as *perceptive subjectivity*. If the other is in the gesture, in his conduct, the very notion of the body, along with that of “psyche”, also undergoes a renewal based on the discoveries regarding the body or postural “schema”. Even the notion of proper body (the body that we “have” and “are”) is not a notion that can be apprehended stripped from the environment in which we live, or from the situation in which we find ourselves and from the conduct we perform. To say the least, it is a system of equivalence and intersensory transpositions between the body and the environment, from which intentionality and gesture occur together. There is no aim without the corresponding gesture, just as there is no gesture without the corresponding object or conduct; one follows the other. When the hand intercedes with the pencil to write, there is no separation between the body, the movement of apprehension, the realization of the intended gesture and the formulation of the meaning on paper (even in an article that is written with four hands). Before this separation what occurs is a single conduct that aims a meaning; in short, there is only one “gestural” or “motor” sense (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 165), which reveals that “every movement is indissolubly movement and consciousness of movement” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 128). Well, *it is this motor sense that the proper body apprehends in the other’s body as nascent conduct and otherness*. Here, the body schema reveals not only an indissoluble relationship with the world, but also with the other: “*the relationship with the other has the value of a true structure; it is a system of relationships within my experience*” (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 320). I do not apprehend or deduce a psyche when I see the other, but a behavior that aims at an environment just like me. In the conduct the experience ceases to be the mine or his property and becomes common.

If my body is no longer only known by a mass of strictly individual sensations, but as an object organized by relationship to its surroundings, the result is that the perception of my body can be transferred to the other and the other’s image can be immediately “interpreted” by my body schema. (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, p. 311)

This ambiguity and game between being and having a body is much emphasized by Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, moreover, also through social roles (cf. pp. 103; 121; 191; 512; 517). In that sense, while I choose to enter and participate in a social rite at a certain point of my engagement I am no longer free to choose in the same way I could before entering it; I am taken by the ritual, by the role I play, just as after the mime of sleeping I am taken by sleep. In one case as in the other it will still be my bodily opening to the sensitive world that will awaken me from the situation (1945, p. 191), as well as, once immersed in a deep mourning that seemed to end all my life, unpretentiously a light attracts my attention, slowly restarting my life in the world through the anonymous senses of my body (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 100). In light of what we said earlier about the effort that inhabits life, we can add to this beautiful passage of Merleau-Ponty that tiredness also removes us intermittently from our engagements, returning us (at least in theory) or pulling us back towards the sensible generality of our natural life.

Despite that, between recognition and strangeness, how does the encounter take place? We need to go a little further.

Reciprocity and inequality

That said, it takes an “availability” for the encounter, as a kind of minimum prerequisite for its experience. Because it is from this initial availability that I and others become friends or enemies, agents and patients, whether in companionship or in disaffection, and so on. Buytendijk distinguishes authentic encounters, where the encounter with another “human being” occurs, and apparent encounters, where we pass unnoticed



between things and mere passersby; as a matter of fact, only the first ones deserve their name, because “each human encounter is in some way mutual, reciprocal” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 42) and only there encounter with “another” take place.

Thus “reciprocity is the condition of an *actual* encounter”, although the author does not hesitate to add that “it is rarely complete” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 42). This seems to place the encounter in the perspective of recognition. But we can’t be wrong here: if reciprocity is a condition for the encounter, “inequality” however is more common, even in the encounter between mother and child, doctor and patient (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 42). As we will see, this complete reciprocity only occurs in the limit experiences of “gift”, “revelation” and with “love encounter”. Nevertheless, the author also describes inequality as a kind of “condition” for encounters (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 42), which is evident in the complementarity of roles, where the doctor can only fulfill his role when the patient fulfills his, where the adult is only realized in relation to the child, the seller in relation to the one who buys, and so on. Most encounters occur through inequality, when there is an intention of the subject as to another, to the conduct of others and, in the limit, even in the relationship between different cultures. It can work as a “condition” actually verified in the meetings, since by the inequality between doctor and patient, teacher and student etc., then it is possible to reach the reciprocity of trust, of adequate and humane treatment, of learning etc.

Let us explore the relationship with an example. The doctor can have merely an intra-mundane encounter with a disease (an encounter with the environment or inter-human world) and remain in the unequal role or, on the contrary, he can have an encounter with the existence of a patient (ill) that uses the inequality of roles for the reciprocity, operating for reciprocity. Only then we discover inequality as a “condition” found in our encounters, which assumes a positive character (contrary to what a hasty reading of the essay seems to suggest), when, in the same example, the doctor does not find just a *sick body-thing*, but *another existence that suffers*. If he does so, it is in the role of doctor, unequal in relation to that of the patient, but also as another existent whose reciprocity lies in the authentic encounter between both.

Therefore, inequality is a condition of the encounter but it does not work in the same way as reciprocity; this is crucial in Buytendijk’s text. Inequality is a contingent and crucial condition since it conditions unequal places of speech, power and roles. In turn, inequality is fundamentally conditioned by reciprocity, capable of *effectuate* an authentic encounter.

Why phenomenology?

Having made these distinctions and conceptual considerations, it is necessary to go a little further in order to discover the doctrinal or conceptual gain of this essay. Because as the title of Buytendijk’s essay indicates, it is a “phenomenology” or a phenomenological approach to the encounter. What does Buytendijk mean by that?

Immediately, this means that the encounter is always correlative to an “experience” of the encounter: “The encounter is a ‘phenomenon’ in the privileged sense of the term” (Buytendijk, 1952, p.10). And that this experience refers to our own existence. “A phenomenology of the encounter also must always be a contribution to the knowledge of existence” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 9). In the encounter it is our being that is at stake, not as one of the possible objects of manifestation, but as the primordial manifestation of being as being-with [*mit-sein*] as existential of our being-in-the-world [*In-der-welt-sein*] (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 13) and, in a hypothetical reformulation, as being-with-the-world [*Mit-der-welt-sein*]. This heuristic hypothesis allows us to better understand that fundamental ambiguity of the encounter already described. For one “is” his body, as a consciousness embodied in it, but also is “in” his body, as a consciousness engaged in the world, and for this reason the person “becomes” herself “with” the world. As Buytendijk concludes in a note, “man by the body and by means of the body becomes with the world” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 40; note). With the other this hypothesis is also true: the other is *by* his body present *in* his body (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 40), which means that corporeality is here simultaneously the *mode of access* to others and the *transcendence correlated* to the otherness of the other.

With a phenomenology of the encounter, it is not a question of a third person description, like an empirical investigation regarding the different cultures and socially operated roles, which would gradually allow to induce the rules of approximation or distance between interlocutors. Also, it is not a privileged description in the first person, i.e., of the subject of knowledge that constitutes the encounter from its own sphere of meaning, just as in the aforementioned Husserlian model the *Ego* constitutes from itself the other, as *alter Ego*. In fact, the answer to “what” is Buytendijk’s phenomenological approach is in the formulation itself: it is a phenomenology based on the “encounter”, which not only describes “the” encounter as a manifestation or phenomenon among others, but is fueled by the encounter and then develops an eminently dialogical description. It shows that the experience is “ours” before being “mine” or “yours” and that the encounter is not a fact among others, but the intentional modality par excellence, from which we not only go to meet others, but even things, in this being-with-the-world. The world is already relational and Buytendijk seems to defend from the beginning the perspective of the world as the place of the encounter or of the encounter as an opening of the possibility of world(s). The world is always common and always plural because it starts



to be understood *from* the perspective of the encounter. And this links the phenomenological approach of the encounter with the phenomenological approach of human behavior (in turn, derived from a study of animal behavior in general¹). If in this essay the urgent question becomes the inter-human relationship, it is because with a phenomenology of the encounter we need to go back to the origin or source of human, understood in the “process involving the surrounding world and the inter-human world” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 10), which allows the link between Buytendijk’s writings.

If this seems to us the doctrinal balance of the essay what would be its legacy for us? Having that in view let us return to what seems most significant in the essay for some final questions and considerations.

Some questions and final remarks

Buytendijk’s essay assemble themes and questions that have crossed the history of phenomenology since Husserl. Above all the essay deals with the encounter with the other, but it also involves the question of the encounter with the things of the world and in general with the world as a horizon of Being, since Buytendijk relies largely in Heidegger’s philosophy, more precisely, in the fundamental condition of Dasein while being in the world with the other. Thus, we are tempted to say that the most radical or fundamental encounter would be that of the Dasein with himself in the otherness of Being. Why not say then: a fundamental encounter expressed by wonder, which encloses the stranger within truth, in a constitutive duplicity of human existence, either in the encounter with oneself, whose immanent knowledge is not the foundation of own existence; with the world, whose light bends with shadows or whose visibility is lined with invisibility (Merleau-Ponty); and with the other, the visible that sees me and penetrates my being, even though not knowing me properly, and that is kept in retreat before the look with which I try to apprehend him or join him. In this sense Buytendijk uses the terms “*heimlich*” and “*unheimlich*” in the essay, taken from Gabriel Marcel, to express this duality especially in the encounter with the other (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 35-36).

Let us set aside here the status of the other’s otherness in Heidegger, apparently more a double of Dasein’s self than a difference with him, since both belong to the same ontological Community. In this case perhaps our most disturbing encounter is with animals, more precisely, with the look of the (animal) creature as Rilke says in another sense (BARBARAS, 2011, p. 166), or even with the things of the world that, in spite of our meaningful and communicative relationship with them very highlighted by Merleau-Ponty and quoted in the essay, and whose “language” our body adhere (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 20; 22), also represent an adversity that we need to overcome. Beginning with our own body (first supported by the mother), to be taken on by an effort that must recede intermittently to recompose itself in the rest or sleep, or even in the enjoyment of life, an effort that will eventually be overcome by the decrepitude of old age with death itself, if it does not happen before with a physical accident or illness, both to be eventually overcome during life. So that our body is not only a virtual potency to be and enjoy in the world (in the essay, “to be by means of the body or by the body”), but also an objective being (in the essay, “to have a body or to be in a body”) which also resists the movement of life within herself.

In this respect, perhaps we can reverse this line of thought and say that it is in the encounter with the other that we seek the way out of the encounter with the adversity of the world, to a more habitable and welcoming world, and in the case of love (just like the child’s first smile to the mother, which represents the threshold to enter into a new world – Buytendijk, 1952, p. 30-31), a response of existence to life, a naturally actual response and not just conceptual. Buytendijk, quoting Marcel in this sense, describes “the nameless sadness that we all experienced in certain hotel rooms where we had the feeling that we had no one to speak to” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 35-36). It is also in this sense that the author interprets through love the overcoming of Heidegger’s ontology by Binswanger (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 30; 52), a love that would represent the ideal of the encounter with the other in the community of “we”, in which reciprocity as the condition “of an *effective* encounter” (p. 42) would be complete.

In turn, does not seem coincidental that Buytendijk opens and closes the essay with the phenomenon of religious rite, whose encounter with the “sacred” seems to englobe the essence of the meaning present in any encounter. In the essay the other appears inhabiting his body as God inhabits the temple of prayer, with the difference well marked by the author that to find God in the temple I need to believe in him, while the other effectively presents himself to me in his body.

Nonetheless Buytendijk says, quoting Binswanger, that to find the other one must choose to find him (Buytendijk, 1952, p.14), be with the other instead of simply passing by. And the author adds that this is “a

¹ Which would lead to a digression passing again through Merleau-Ponty, Buytendijk’s insistent reference, and which comes from a quite curious game of influences between the authors. What Merleau-Ponty called “original intentionality” or “motricity” can be read as a philosophical formulation of the “intentionality of the environment” [*Umweltintentionalität*], developed by the psychologists of the time, and of the “motor intention” [*Bewegungsentwurf*] present in the writings of Buytendijk (Buytendijk & Plesner, 1936, p. 94). Ahead in a curious inversion between influencer and influenced, Merleau-Ponty’s reunion with Buytendijk occurs when this starts to relies on the original intentionality of perception to write his *Phenomenology of the Encounter*. The encounter between the two is therefore multifaceted and the intentionality that comes from it is, in fact, reciprocal. As Dekkers writes, “around 1945 the roles reverse. From that point Buytendijk gratefully adopts Merleau-Ponty’s way of thinking in order to formulate his own view on humans and their world in existential-phenomenological terms. From a philosophical point of view Merleau-Ponty has gone from being Buytendijk’s pupil to being his teacher” (Dekkers, 1995, p.22).



choice conditioned by history and by the objective sense of what is found” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 14), thus avoiding the risk of an abstract or formal definition. Perhaps we should add with Merleau-Ponty (1945) the reverse movement, this by which we are also chosen by the other, i.e., by the social role that has been assigned to us in a game in which we determine each other reciprocally, in harmony or in conflict, or by the other’s direct or indirect action on us. For example, the overseer who whip the slave is also the arm of the white man who is not there, but whom the black man ultimately recognizing in the category of the white of a society that imposes itself on him and which he did not choose, as well as in the formation of the social roles that historically condition our encounters, the choices can be as relative as those of the prince in his role, as Merleau-Ponty says in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945, p. 103-104).

For this reason, we consider to be very current this emphasis on the social and historical conditioning of our encounters with others, marked by rites and social roles, that our meetings are always guided by social roles (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 8); statement at the same time trivial but with great consequences for a phenomenology of the encounter. After all, a concrete phenomenology of our encounters under the generality of the structure of otherness in our lives, that is assumed always in a certain situation in the social world, must lead us to a concrete ethics, committed to a politics of affections, because to perceive and to find the other, it is necessary to live him, as Buytendijk says with Merleau-Ponty regarding even things.

We can finish our journey asking, therefore, about the significance of the great emphasis given by Buytendijk to the conditioning of our encounters with others, through our historical and social roles. And we believe that the answer to this question lies in the highlight of the structure on which the phenomenology of the encounter elaborated by the author is based, and that runs through the entire description of his essay, although it is explained only at the end. It is about the distinction between symmetric and asymmetric encounters (Buytendijk, 1952, pp. 57-59). We have already noticed that the author opens and closes the essay on the issue of magical and religious rites that aim at the encounter with the “sacred” or, we could say, the reality that encloses in any way the secret or destiny of our lives. It is no coincidence that in the second paragraph of the essay, in which the author moves from the religious ritual to those of our meetings, Buytendijk (1952) highlights what would be proper to every phenomenon of encounter: “the inexhaustible secret of the other” (p. 7). This is clear in the case of the “mysterious” and the “sublime” (p. 56). And this is where the important distinction between symmetric and asymmetric encounters arises, with which we will problematize the question of encounters through social roles.

For Buytendijk, when it comes to the religious encounter with the sacred (in the ritual or in the temple) the relationship is symmetrical insofar as man taken by the solemnity of the rite gets rid of his uniqueness. We can say that man is only a role in solemn activity. In this sense, we say that on these occasions the behavior is formal, precisely because individual, spontaneous or natural manifestations do not have space. And here comes what seems to be the problem of social roles in our social gatherings, because the role is by definition impersonal or stripped of individuality, a fact highlighted by Silva (2014) early in his reading of the essay (Silva, 2014, p. 2). It is not by chance that Buytendijk compares the ritual of prayer to the military ritual (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 58) in which respect and submission are required. Which in turn means that in the event of a solemnity there is no room for reciprocity. In this case,

the distance is a real gap immediately apprehended in the context of the situation and which excludes any possibility of a reciprocal presence on equal terms. In this case, man is obliged to appeal to supra-personal means that he cannot take from a domain of his individual experience, but which are given to him by the collective knowledge concerning the foundation of the solemnity of the situation and by the tradition in which he is situated (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 57).

On the contrary, our asymmetric meetings reserve to each one “the fact of partly remaining oneself” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 58). In other words, in the relationship with the other each one partially reserves himself in his singular existence: “This reticence, this partial reservation is essential for our presence in the encounter and frequentation of the other. It is more and more explicit as self-consciousness and personal moment are more aimed in the presence” (p. 58). As we said, it is naturally a presence that hides its unique life history, considering that consciousness is always engaged and formed in its historical context of life –as Buytendijk says in the light of the Merleau-Ponty of *Phenomenology of Perception*. We can do some remarks here, because although banal they are commonly ignored. As Buytendijk emphasizes when we meet someone in general, in the context of our relationships and social roles, we always find him at a certain moment of his life and of ours (Buytendijk, 1952, pp. 14-15). This is how we often have our everyday encounters. From them we glimpse the being of this other: his appearance, style, position and manifestation located in the world. And yet, just as the social role is impersonal this first identification of the other inevitably tends to incur in his simplification. In Sartrean terms, who said this long before Foucault, in his objectification: this person is so-and-so, this and that etc. But an unprecedented revelation about his past is enough to make us feel a shock that forces to review our judgments about this other. To make us follow the intricacies of his life until “reach” the bottom of his gaze, irreducible to all those values in which he is formed and realized in the world; that gives him, while still alive, the responsibility for its current being and for the openness of his existence.



It is worth saying that our relations are, in general, always asymmetrical, due either to the difference of our social roles and positions in the world vis-à-vis the other or even to age differences. These are encounters based on the self-presence in a certain situation or social role in the relationship with the other. Therefore, marked by the characteristic distance of all communication. That is why we said that the asymmetry of our encounters are not only due to the constitutive distance reserved to each one in our relationship, but also to the roles assumed by each one of us in these relationships (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 14).

We can say in this sense that for the author love – as a community of “we” (Binswanger) – corresponds to the ideal of complete reciprocity in face of the generality of our social encounters, in which reciprocity as the condition of the encounter is always incomplete. Now, what would characterize this loving community to the point that this love becomes the maximum of the possibility of our personal encounters? Following Binswanger, Buytendijk considers this love to be the transcendental condition of all our encounters. Without it we would not be able to encounter – albeit frequently in an incomplete form – with the other. Quoting Binswanger, the author states that “existence is in itself a loving encounter... revelation of ‘you’ by ‘me’ and of ‘me’ by ‘you’ in ‘we’. It is only because of that I can find you and choose you, and reciprocally” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 52), “original possibility” of those who love each other and of all possible forms of encounters, including the conflicted ones.

In the end this means that the summit of the encounter with the other transcends social roles, “standing” below or beyond our roles in the world. After all, quoting once again Binswanger, Buytendijk writes that the meaning of the “love encounter” is that of a supraspatial, supratemporal and supra-historical “being together in love” (Buytendijk, 1952, p. 53). It is the reciprocal realization of the endowment, gift or grace. In a closer possibility, the case of lovers that is subject to the contingencies and historical conditions of each one (thus, it is said “to find the love of your life”), in the case of social relations, certainly a community to come, still distant, but as a *telos* that would not be aimed if it were not already present in the structure of our existence, as shown by the child’s first smile at his mother².

Final remark

The richness of Buytendijk’s essay *Phenomenology of the Encounter* lies in the number of questions it raises; richness that can be expressed by a significant variety of themes and questions, which we have gathered in our text and which even competed for the title of the paper. We leave these themes and questions to the reader as an invitation to carry out a phenomenology of the encounter through new readings and investigations. We thought to name this path that we carried out on the following terms: “Going to the other with the heart: the transcendental significance of the encounter in Buytendijk”; “The familiar stranger: about the encounter in Buytendijk”; “What role does the other have in my life? The encounter as the first task of phenomenology in Buytendijk”; “Is it possible to meet someone else? Buytendijk between reciprocity and inequality”; “The paradox of encounter in Buytendijk: between reciprocity and inequality”; “The encounter as the first task of phenomenology: a legacy from Buytendijk”.

If we choose “The encounter as the primary task of phenomenology. Reciprocity and inequality in Buytendijk” it is because it seemed to us that this title better covers the path taken in the article: with the first sentence we try to highlight the organizing principle of the transcendental meaning of the encounter in Buytendijk’s essay, whose object is love; with the second sentence we try to highlight the content that runs through the essay, which shows that the encounters are marked by reciprocity and inequality of social roles. It is up to the reader to evaluate if our choice was well made, and perhaps choose his own or to formulate another one that seems more appropriate to the paper. At the same time, he is invited to think about it and to remount the pieces of the puzzle we have put together from the phenomenology of the encounter, by Buytendijk.

² We found a corroboration to our reading key of Buytendijk’s essay in Mahéo’s (2012) work on the conception of love in Binswanger, and for that reason we will summarize it in what matters most to our question. Contrary to the anguish in Heidegger, who operates the way out of our everyday life “from below” and revealing its foundations, i.e., the openness of Being that makes it possible, we can say that love in Binswanger leaves everyday life “through the top” (p. 120). That is why Binswanger speak of a beyond-world of love, which does not mean the departure of lovers from the world as such, but another way of opening that world, which the author calls the way of the “heart” (p. 121). This way reveals a new understanding of our being and of being in general, and it is not by chance that Binswanger compares it “to the religious *tremendum*” (p. 122). The world then becomes less significant than the “heart”; rather, it becomes the condition for the encounter. For this world is also from the beginning the world of “you” (p. 123).



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