ESJP
#22 | 2022

A Phenomenologist, a Psychologist, and a Rich Man Walk into a Burrow…

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Franz Kafka's *The Burrow* (1971) tells us the peculiar story of a creature's subterranean life in its burrow, an existence of complete isolation lived mostly underground in a burrow it has meticulously designed and constructed. We find out that this construction process is never really over, as the creature constantly considers redesigning elements of its home to improve it even further (Kafka, p. 329). Most of these considerations centre around optimizing the protective functions of the burrow, which act as a barrier against intrusion. One element it considers reconstructing is the labyrinth that leads to the burrow's entrance. Any intruder is likely to get lost in the maze, whilst the creature knows perfectly the correct way through, as it knows intimately the entire layout of its burrow (Kafka, p. 331-2). Toward the end of the story the creature's isolation is interrupted by a whistling noise that confronts it with the potential presence of another creature (Kafka, p. 344, 353). The creature's thinking then runs wild as it rabidly tries its best to discern who this potential intruder is and what might motivate them, only for the story to abruptly end mid-sentence without revealing any more about the encounter it anticipates (Kafka, p. 358-9).

Kafka's story, through the creature's rabid attempts to understand the intruding Other that ultimately escapes the creature's knowing, establishes as a theme the relation between self and the Other. Whilst in the story hostility is implicit in the attempt to see through the Other's eyes, the expression "to put yourself in someone else's shoes" is generally understood to imply an experience of empathy, the sharing in the feelings of an Other. Yet, in the literal sense, nothing of the Other remains except their shoes in which you place your*self*. You simply assume their position, which constitutes an act of understanding, but in no way a confrontation with their particular being. This essay explores the phenomenon of confrontation with an Other through Franz Kafka's *The Burrow*, asking the question of whether perceiving the world from someone else's position constitutes a meeting with their being. To this end I will be drawing heavily from Laura Stahman's Levinasian reading of Kafka's story. Using James Gibson's theory of occlusion I will examine this reading through the lens of perception, which provides one possible answer to the afore-posed question.

Gibson was a psychologist whose research focussed on the field of visual perception. In chapter eleven of *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1986), Gibson calls to attention the discovery of the occluding edge. The discovery refers to an experiment where participants watched the coming together of two planes of texture on a screen. As the planes met, the participants observed how one plane appeared to move behind the other as it gradually disappeared from view upon the edge of the other plane. In reality, there was no depth to the display that the participants were shown. The plane that disappeared upon the edge of the other plane never moved behind it, but was simply progressively *deleted* upon that edge, gradually shrinking until it was fully removed from the display and only one plane remained. So although the plane had in fact been entirely deleted at the end of the display, the participants perceived it to persist in occlusion behind the other plane (Gibson, p. 180-2). An implication of this discovery is that perception does not have to coincide with sensory input. A hidden surface, by its occluded nature, does not provide sensory input by which it can be perceived: it can only be *remembered* from previous sensory input when we observed it from a position where it was not occluded. Yet in the experiment, no sensory input ever existed for the hidden plane because it was never hidden but simply deleted. The fact that the participants nonetheless *perceived* the deleted plane to persist as being behind the other plane puts into question the assertion that perception needs to be caused

by a basis of sensory information. Therefore, when Kafka's creature attempts to see the world through the eyes of its imagined intruder, this is not a futile effort. Gibson argues that orientation is constituted not only by perception of the space that one can see, but it also includes space that one cannot observe but which can nonetheless be perceived (Gibson, p. 188-90). This also means that without having to place yourself in someone else's exact position, you can perception-wise put yourself in their shoes and adopt their point of view to share an experience of the world without having to receive the exact same sensory input as they do (Gibson, p. 191).

Alternatively to this psychological understanding, another approach to the relation between self and the Other is found in phenomenology. "Other" here is used in the sense of something that is fundamentally beyond the grasp of the subject, separated by a gap that cannot be bridged by perception, visual or otherwise. To alleviate this dissonance the Other is reduced to object. Levinas points out that as soon the subject tries to understand the Other, the Other is subsumed: understanding happens in relation to the self and is an objectification (Levinas, 1996, p. 9). This conclusion is not a novel position in the field of phenomenology. However, Levinas' thought does distinguish itself from that of other thinkers like Sartre in reversing the approach to the constitution of a subject. According to Levinas, it is not the case that the pre-existing subject is the original source of meaning in relation to which objects are placed. Rather, the constitution of a subject requires in the first place an object in relation to which the subject can place *itself*. It is only in encounter with the Other that we acquire subjecthood as we are invoked to express ourselves as an "I" before the "you" of the Other (Levinas, p. 7-8; Stahman. 2004, p. 25-6). Stahman provides us with a reading of *The Burrow* that uses this approach to the subject as a lens to view Kafka's creature. She points to Levinas' insistence that prior to this experience the self exists only as an interiority, and it is through the act of speech that the self is externalised as a personality presented before the Other. Before a meeting with the Other, the self exists only in the sense of "being there", "*Il y a*", as opposed to the exterior "*me voici*" of a personality that presents itself situated as "I am here" (Stahman, p. 26-8). In Stahman's reading, the creature in Kafka's *The Burrow* exists only *there*, as a non-externalised self, self-identified and isolated from any interaction (Stahman, p. 28). The prospect of being confronted with an Other, having to present itself as an "I", induces the greatest anxiety in the creature. Its inner monologue foregoes any possibility of expressing itself as subject before the Other: "the instant when we see each other, more, at the moment when we merely guess at each other's presence, we shall both blindly bare our claws and teeth, neither of us a second before or after the other, both of us filled with a new and different hunger, even if we should already be gorged to bursting" (Kafka, p. 358). If the relation between subject and object is symbolised in Kafka's story, then it is represented, as Stahman points out, as a violent struggle (Stahman, p. 31).

Throughout Kafka's story, the burrowed creature continually shows itself to be capable of excellent orientation and perception. By Gibson's logic it should be equally capable of perceiving the world from another creature's perspective, placing itself in someone else's shoes. One of the conclusions Gibson draws from the discovery of the occluding edge is that the ability to place yourself in someone else's shoes in perception means that egocentrism is not something that comes naturally to humans (Gibson, p. 191). Yet, no empathy is to be detected in the inner monologue of Kafka's creature. It is capable of perceiving the world from another's position, and yet remains deeply egotistical. What Stahman's reading of Kafka has shown us is that the two are in fact not mutually exclusive. Perception is an act of understanding: not a meeting with the Other by externalisation of the self, but an internal grasping at the Other, like the egotistical speculation Kafka's burrower undertakes upon the disturbance of its isolation. It has no interest in a meeting with the Other. On the contrary – that is its biggest fear. Indeed, it tries its hardest to alleviate the uncertainty of this interaction by subsuming the Other in its understanding.

To conclude, I would like to compare *The Burrow* to a different but matching story: Adolf Loos' *The Poor Little Rich Man* (2003). Stahman has shown us how Kafka's story can be read as an account of an interiorised self, skilfully perceptive but exclusively self-relational, that comes to be called upon by an Other through which its subjectivity is threatened to be drawn out. Loos' story, in contrast, tells of a socially accomplished rich man with a faithful wife, plenty of children and loving friends. Suddenly enamoured by art, the man has an architect fill his house perfectly with art to the extent that even the slightest change would ruin its composition. This aesthetic perfection that leaves no room for expression makes the man isolated, his subjectivity locked out from the rest of the world. When he receives presents for his birthday, he is unable to place them in his house, which leaves him deeply unhappy. He can no longer interact with his relatives the way he used to, as his social capacities – empathy perhaps among them – come to be affected (Loos, p. 18-20). Loos' story is in this sense a reversal of the account of Kafka's burrower in that it tells of an externalised self that is forced into its interior, a subject that can no longer express himself as an "I" before an Other but whose existence is now solely a "being there". The story tells not of a loss of perceptive ability which Gibson hails as proof of empathy. When it comes to the relation between self and the Other, it is therefore not productive to think of the idea of placing yourself in another's shoes as a meeting. In Loos' story, the suddenness with which art entered the poor little rich man's life left him more or less unknowing and ignorant to its meaning, certainly compared to the architect. When the architect visits, he finds the man wearing the slippers designed for the bedroom in a different part of the house, completely unaware that he has placed himself in the wrong shoes (Loos, p. 21).

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