

THE OPACITY AND THE PROXIMITY OF THE  
GREAT OUTDOORS  
A PRÉCIS OF “INDEXICALISM: REALISM AND  
THE METAPHYSICS OF PARADOX”<sup>1</sup>

Hilan Bensusan

ABSTRACT: This is a précis of Hilan Bensusan's *Indexicalism: Realism and the Metaphysics of Paradox*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2021, by the author.

KEYWORDS: Indexicalism; Post-metaphysics; Heidegger; Levinas; Kripke

Metaphysics is often associated with the effort to shed light on what is obscure, to elucidate what is hidden, to make what eludes the senses transparent or to map out *terra incognita*. Martin Heidegger diagnosed the route of (Western) metaphysics as that of forcing the concealed to unveil – taking what lies underneath *physis* to be something that can (and should) be exposed.<sup>2</sup> Transparency appears as the name of the game and it could only fail to be pursued in the name of a preference for ignorance, a resignation to one's own limitations or a preference for some sort of cognitive abstention. Édouard Glissant described this bias for transparency in terms of an indignant reaction to any attempt to defend a right to opacity: ‘are you advocating barbarism?’<sup>3</sup> Still, he wonders whether the time is ripe for the idea that there is more to opacity than acceptance of one's limitations or full-blown cowardice for knowledge. What seems to me one of the remarkable features of

---

<sup>1</sup> Bensusan, *Indexicalism*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, XXXVIII, 110; Heidegger, *History of Being*, VI, 57 and XI, 115.

<sup>3</sup> See Glissant, “For opacity”.

the philosophy of this early 21<sup>st</sup> century is that there is a tendency to directly address the issue of the dignity of opacity; further, it is often conceived that there is a real opacity that is a feature of how things are. Heidegger has foreseen the possibility of a post-metaphysical philosophical project that would be oriented by something other than the quest for a transparent universe. This post-metaphysics endeavor would ultimately decide the fate of the metaphysical inquiry. In any case, the project of attending to opacity as a faithfulness to reality and not a consequence of human incapacities, has flourished in several directions recently.

Speculative realism can be understood as a departure from the quest for transparency – from the assumption that things could be fully exposed, even if we ourselves fail to achieve this fully illuminated view. Real opacity is understood as an important quality of what there is and what we can then conceive as a post-metaphysical task is to show how it can fit in a picture of the world. Speculative realism offered accounts of opacity as something intrinsically connected to how things are; because, say, the withdrawn real object is not accessible to any perceiver or because there is a radical contingency that cannot be possibly overcome – Graham Harman’s and Quentin Meillassoux’s positions respectively.<sup>4</sup> *Indexicalism* proposes to approach opacity from the commitment to do justice to the others as others and, as such, not to make transparent through complete descriptions or substantive accounts. The quest for full transparency is somehow attached to the idea that there is a totality of what exists that could, in principle, be brought to view. This totality would have no blind spots, neither as inner secrets inside objects nor as outer boundaries that appear as horizons to what can be viewed. *Indexicalism* attempts to exorcise totality by positing the inextricable tie between reality and an engagement with deixis – exteriority, and therefore the outside, the beyond one’s reach and the Great Outdoors, in Meillassoux’s apt phrase, are an undetachable part of what there is.

Indexicalism is the claim that substantives are implicitly indexical – not only because we think things through by means of indexical terms or because terms in the language have a crucial connection to where one stands but also because reality itself is best described if we replace substantives by indexicals. This could sound like a puzzling claim and the book proceeds to unpack it step by step so

---

<sup>4</sup> See Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology* and Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

that its consequences can be brought to the fore. Indexicalism is the idea that the world is ultimately best described in terms of indexical expressions like 'here', 'now', 'you', 'outside', 'same' or 'other'. Substantive expressions like 'water', 'trees', 'the planet Venus', 'the year 2021' or 'the German population' abbreviate indexical expressions, like 'that drinkable stuff that fills this and that lake and this and that bottle', 'those green things on the surface of this planet', 'the morning star and the evening star', 'this year' or 'those who live between this and that borders'. Indexicals are not our own way to conceive what is around us, but they are a key to what is nearby even when they refer to what is other, or outdoors. They carry an unredeemable opacity that follows from their irreducibly situated character. Indexical expressions provoke vertigo that could suggest that they are themselves just contextual shorthand for substantives – indexicalism, instead, bites the bullet and holds that reality cannot be deprived of its situatedness.

To be sure, this is a road to paradox because it is from an engagement with the quest for a view from nowhere that the situated nature of what is best described by deixis is brought to view. It is as if totality has to be somehow approached in order to dismantle the very idea, associated to it, that there could be a view from nowhere. As far as it is a metaphysics, indexicalism is a strange, non-standard one – it is also a critique of metaphysics for it opposes any complete view based on substantive descriptions. Rather, indexicalism embraces the situated character of what is real – but this is no detachment from the (metaphysical) task to provide a general view of things. It is a paradoxico-metaphysics in the sense developed by Jon Cogburn.<sup>5</sup> Cogburn understands that if metaphysics is taken to be the most general possible view of how things are, a paradoxico-metaphysics is one that assumes metaphysics is impossible (or undesirable, or inappropriate, or violent) and attempts to provide the most general possible view of how things are such that metaphysics is impossible (or undesirable, or inappropriate, or violent). In other words, the criticism of metaphysics is itself part of the metaphysical endeavor – for indexicalism, in particular, it is from the metaphysical quest that substantive descriptions of reality are criticized. Further, one could say that the price in paradox is paid because it is a way to make sure that the others' right to opacity is not going to be trespassed

---

<sup>5</sup> Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations*.

by the effort to make everything fully transparent. Indexicalism understands that reality cannot be described by substantive and provides a metaphysical account of how it is such that it cannot afford to be described through substantives. Paradox, and I'll come back to them below, is perhaps intimately connected to opacity and, in particular, to the opacity of the others, of the outside, of the outdoors as such.

*Indexicalism* draws from the work of David Kaplan and John Perry about demonstratives and essential indexicals.<sup>6</sup> Kaplan understands a demonstrative to directly refer to an object in the world through its character, its linguistic meaning, which is resolved into its content, the object, through context. Perry argues that this semantic story undermines the indexical poison carried by demonstratives: they cannot be resolved into (substantive) individuals for there are roles in thought that substantives cannot play. The opacity of terms like 'here', 'now' or even 'I' is what enables "I am here now" to be true independently of any occasional substantive correlate to the demonstratives. Indexicalism takes this a step further to argue that reality itself is (implicitly) indexical. That is to say that indexical terms fix a reference independently of any substantive description and what they refer to – call it an 'address' – is the ultimate furniture of the universe. That is to say that indexicalism is a situated metaphysics where no view from nowhere can be provided except the one that holds that there is no reality stripped from the situatedness that a specific position amid indexicals can afford.

In order to elaborate indexicalism, the book draws from a reading of Emmanuel Levinas' account of the absolute Other informed by the idea of a process philosophy that emerged from the work of Alfred North Whitehead. Levinas argues that an asymmetry between me and the Other is a key to avoiding both an all-encompassing totality that cannot be faithful to exteriority and a view from nowhere that sees me and the Other as two poles of a single tension. The Other is not a cluster of predications, not even one that is built from a projection of myself into another alter-ego, as Edmond Husserl claimed. The Other interrupts my thought and action instead of being integrated into them – the Other reaches me not through a full presence but rather through traces that load me with an infinite responsibility that eludes complete understanding. Levinas'

---

<sup>6</sup> Kaplan, "Demonstratives"; Perry, "The problem of the essential indexical"

insistence on the asymmetrical nature of the Other is a gesture towards an opacity – and, indeed, a right to it. It is not that we are limited in our cognitive capacities to reach the Other, it is, rather, that the Other as Other sets a limit to my freedom to pursue knowledge and render what I find transparent. As several people have pointed out, Levinas' Other is perhaps unduly restricted to other humans that can not only refuse my thought and action but contest it.<sup>7</sup> Thinking opacity in terms of a (metaphysical) otherness would require to go beyond human otherness or, rather, be oblivious to any predication on what is capable to interrupt one's own agenda.

The book claims that Levinas' gesture of separating the Other as an opaque trace and the eventual information that can be provided to my thinking by encountering what is exterior makes sense outside of his own philosophy. The gesture is explicit in his insistence on a dimension of 'saying' that cannot be exhausted by what is 'said'.<sup>8</sup> There is more to the word of the Other than what is said through it. Because saying eludes what is said, there is an element of opacity with respect to the transparency of the information acquired. The gesture is somehow similar to the persistence of the capacity of an expression to fix reference independently of the description associated with it in Kripke's picture of direct reference.<sup>9</sup> Levinas understands the saying as akin to an interpellation that cannot fully boil down to the content of what is said – this is the dimension of the Other that always interrupts my understanding even though what is said cannot be fully detached from the interruption itself. The saying is an independent dimension of me being addressed by someone else. This is perhaps the most central gesture that indexicalism inherits from Levinas.

*Indexicalism* develops a metaphysics of the others according to which others as others are part of the picture and therefore needs to extend beyond the Levinasian Other towards anything exterior – ultimately towards the Great Outdoors. In order to do that, I consider Whitehead's account of perception as ubiquitous, his notion of importance as a crucial element of attention and coordination and his account of measurement where the standing location plays

---

<sup>7</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 37–8.

<sup>8</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, ch. 1.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Kripke, "Speaker's reference and semantic reference".

a central role.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the metaphysics of the others resolve in an account of perception as the very place of exteriority where the Great Outdoors in its opacity is brought to proximity and can interrupt and suspend the situated action. The outside replaces the very agenda of the perceiver and poses questions concerning the dignity of knowledge. “Yes, you can know me”, would claim the others, “but please don’t” – in a variation of Levinas’ injunction from the face of the Other, “you can kill me but please don’t”. Opacity emerges as a right that is constituent of what the others, in their irreducible exteriority – it is not an epistemic opacity resulting from my limits to know the external world, rather, it is an appeal that comes from the very claim to justice towards the others as others. This demand of opacity is not projected onto reality from elsewhere – from cognitive limitations or a sense of respect coming from subjective or intersubjective values – but rather it is a consequence of otherness as such. Opacity is a result of a situated metaphysics of the others where exteriority is always in place – like horizons that, as such, cannot be fully resolved into further landscapes.

A situated metaphysics is committed to viewing things in proximity. It is in proximity that the others, as the exterior, leave their mark.<sup>11</sup> It is in proximity that the exercise of receptivity, that appears in the book as a figure of hospitality, occurs – perception is situated and, therefore, located within the horizon of the others. It is from a circumscription that things appear as they are ultimately indexical; exteriority, in contrast with totality, leaves no room for general encompassing descriptions and indexicalism posits to substantives in the world. As a consequence, as the Coda of the book suggests, acting is always located even when thought appears to be global. The idea of a substantive reality has a lot to do with the colonial enterprises that export practices to different contexts with little engagement with the found others. Making explicit how substantives have an underlying indexical structure, a situated metaphysics goes hand in hand with an effort to promote a decolonization of thought, Indexicalism is committed to the idea of perspective that appears in the accounts of Amerindian thinking put forward by anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. The privilege of deixis over substantives in the emerging perspectivism is what grounds a

---

<sup>10</sup> See *Process and Reality*, *Modes of Thought* and *Concept of Nature*, respectively, for the three ideas.

<sup>11</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*.

---

multinaturalism according to which what differs between humans and animals has to do with the way their bodies relate to their surroundings. What is common between them is the indexicals they share because they are all positioned. The situated metaphysics of the others reject substantives both in the form of substances that persist as *causa sui* and in the form of relations between poles that can be described from nowhere. Multinaturalism is a view of situated bodies according to which what is common between them is the indexical position they all enjoy. The paradox can be expressed thus: everything is situated.

The paradoxico-metaphysics of the others is not alien to Levinas' own endeavor which can be described by what he calls the 'paradox of freedom': I'm free to discover my responsibilities that cancel my freedom. My sovereign quest for knowledge is tempered by the responsibilities that I find on my way and cannot relinquish. Freedom is there to reveal responsibility and responsibility cannot be fully compatible with freedom. Still, my responsibility cannot suppress my freedom as it is my way to find them out even though the Other precedes my freedom and makes possible my thinking even when engaged in the sovereign quest for knowledge. The message is that opacity is attached to the quest for transparency – paradoxically, it is the exercise of spontaneity that makes the others come to the picture as others. In an indexicalist metaphysics of the others, opacity is a consequence of the unavoidable encounter with the exterior, with the outside. The Great Outdoors as such cannot be but a repository of opaqueness that is not substantive precisely because indexicalism makes clear that opacity is itself situated. Further, it is itself an effect of not being able to move away from one's particular position without reaching another, equally particular, one. It is only from a situated perspective that the absolute exteriority of the Great Outdoors, opaque and in proximity, can come to view. As a paradoxico-metaphysics, indexicalism moves out of the project of metaphysics towards reinstating locality and making sure situatedness cannot be dismissed once its intelligence is captured. The others, appearing as transparent encounters with what transcends our agenda, make claims on how things are pictured. If they cannot be dismissed, their opacity is more than a lack of light.

## REFERENCES:

- Bensusan, Hilan. *Indexicalism: Realism and the Metaphysics of Paradox*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.
- Cogburn, Jon. *Garcian Meditations: The Dialectic of Persistence in Form and Object*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- Glissant, Édouard. “For opacity”, in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 189-194.
- Harman, Graham. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Pelican, 2018.
- Heidegger, Martin. *History of Beyng*. Trans. William McNeil and Jeffrey Powell, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mindfulness*. Trans. Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- Kaplan, David. ‘Demonstratives’, in *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. Joseph Almog et al., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 481–563.
- Kripke, Saul. “Speaker's reference and semantic reference”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy II*, 1977, pp. 255-276.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006.
- Meillassoux, Quentin, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, London: Bloomsbury, 2009.
- Perry, John. ‘The Problem of the Essential Indexical’, *Noûs*, 13.1, 1979, pp. 3–21.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *The Concept of Nature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Modes of Thought*, New York: The Free Press, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Gifford Lectures, University of Edinburgh, 1927–28, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, New York: The Free Press, 1978.