

Phenomenology of Distraction, or Attention in the Fissuring of Time and Space

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Abstract

The goal of “Phenomenology of Distraction” is to explore the imbrication of attention and distraction within existential spatiality and temporality. First, I juxtapose the Heideggerian dispersion of concern (which includes, among other things, the attentive comportment) in everyday life, conceived as a way to get distracted from one’s impending mortality, to Fernando Pessoa’s embracing of the inauthentic, superficial, and restless existence, where attention necessarily reverts into distraction. Second, I consider the philosophical confessions of St. Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as evidence for the proto-phenomenological temporal synthesis that hinges upon distraction and dispersion, despite the confessors’ best efforts to pay attention to their inner life and to concentrate it in the eternal present. The paper concludes with an assessment of the ethical effects of mutual distraction, outlining a model of “distracted intersubjectivity.”

Keywords

attention, distraction, existential spatiality, inner-time consciousness, inauthenticity

A conventional theory of attention predicates the act of attending on the double presence of that to which this act is directed and of the subject who never detaches itself from its attentive regard. Attending to something is being in attendance at the site of one’s concern, even when this entails being outside or beside oneself in the Heideggerian *ekstases* of existence. But what if I turn my attention either to my own or to the other’s death, to the non-place where, despite the desire of Orpheus, I may accompany the other no further, let alone persevere in the fullness of self-presence? And what if such “attention without attending” is neither the exception nor the extreme possibility of our psychic comportment but the very ground from which psychic life rises and to which it falls? When the hypothesis of the co-presence of the subject and its object collapses, when we pay attention to something with an eye to the irrevocable background of non-presence, when cracks and fissures develop in the edifice

of intentionality, then attention begins to exhibit certain features of distraction, at least in the Latin sense of *distractio* meaning “disunion,” “separation,” or “pulling apart.”

While attention should be decoupled from presence, distraction should be dissociated from a sheer negativity of evasion and absence. Positively put, distraction denotes an excessive tending or straining toward... that pulverizes intentionality by orienting a single noetic act in too many directions at the same time.¹ In keeping with the manifold and dispersed mode of being in the world, the same distracted mental process aims at more than one object at once, thereby undermining the impermeable façade of the noetic-noematic correlation. We may speak of a non-relation between the consciousness of... and that of which it is conscious in distraction, precisely because the atomic correlation splits up, breaks apart, and branches out toward several errant noematic unities that kaleidoscopically supplant one another beyond the horizon of determinacy. Distraction—always straining toward more than a simple consciousness of something can encompass—glimpses the impossible attention: it catches sight of the hyper-attention that slips away from the closed circuit of intentionality.

I. Spatiality of Distraction (Heidegger with Pessoa)

The linguistic connotations of the German word for distraction (*Zerstreuung*, from *streuen*: to strew, scatter, disperse) invite a reflection on its relation to spatiality.² This invitation has been taken up by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, where the existential spatiality of Dasein, its peculiar “style” of worldly existence, is described in terms of a dispersion: “Dasein’s facticity is such that its being-in-the-world has always dispersed [*zerstreut*] itself or even split itself up [*zersplittert*] into definite ways of being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated by the following examples: having to do with something,

¹ Hence, Blanchot: “Inattention: the intensity of it... Inattention neither negative nor positive, but excessive, which is to say without intentionality” (Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock [Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1995], 55). While I agree with Blanchot that the extreme intensity of inattention is “neither negative nor positive,” I think that it would be more accurate to say that it only exacerbates the logic of intentionality, disseminating it in the entire phenomenological world.

² See Samuel Weber, “Art, Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin,” in *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 92.

producing something, attending to something and looking after it.”³ Going through the open list of concerns (*Besorge*) whose demands pull Dasein apart, we might notice that attending to something is here classified as one of the “definite ways of being-in,” and, therefore, as one of the byproducts of Dasein’s originary self-dispersion. The subordination of attention to distraction implies that the ostensibly positive, attentive orientation is unavoidably dispersed in the practical engagement with and in the world. The ecstatic constitution of Dasein, the fact of its ontological relationality (being itself outside of itself), casts dispersion in terms of the general modality of existential spatiality, irreducible to an accidental element of Dasein’s being-in-the-world.⁴ If this modality were to be considered “foundational,” it would have supplied a rather precarious foundation, to say the least. This is because dispersion decimates all sense of permanence insofar as distracted absorption in the world of concern denies Dasein the possibility of tarrying along, or resting (it “seeks restlessness [*Unruhe*],” and has “the character of ‘never dwelling anywhere’ [*Aufenthaltslosigkeit*]”).⁵ Everyday Dasein distracts itself from itself, disperses itself in the world, and *is* this non-abiding dispersion responsible for its character as *Mitsein*, being-with.⁶

Inauthentic existence encapsulated in distraction—even there where it assumes the form of an attentively absorbed approach to exteriority—is the very condition the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa embraces in his poetry and prose.⁷ In this sense, Pessoa’s *oeuvre* may be construed as the indispensable

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 83.

⁴ On the subject of *Zerstreuung* in Heidegger, see Derrida, “*Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference*,” in *Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), where he writes: “*Dasein* in general hides, shelters in itself the internal possibility of a factual dispersion or dissemination [*faktische Zerstreuung*] in its own body [*Leiblichkeit*]” (391). That is to say, distraction or dispersion is not just a purely accidental and external possibility that befalls Dasein but like death itself is a possibility that individuates or singularizes, one that is proper to the kind of being in the world that Dasein is.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 216–17. First published as *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993), 172. Hereafter *Being and Time*, followed first by English pagination, and second, if given, by German pagination.

⁶ On the association of *Mitsein* and *Zerstreuung*, see Martin Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang vom Leibniz*, Gesamtausgabe, Band 26 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1990), esp. paragraph 10. I will consider certain aspects of the dispersed *Mitsein* in the final section of the present essay.

⁷ Thus far, the comparative studies of Heidegger and Pessoa have been sketchy, at best. Aside from *O Poeta Pensante—Martin Heidegger e Fernando Pessoa* (ed. Leda Miranda Hühne [Rio de Janeiro: UAPÉ, 1994]) that attempts to stage the first virtual dialogue on the themes of life,

underside of Heidegger's philosophical project, while the poet himself emerges as an unwavering skeptic of authenticity, who is thus more poignant in the role of the philosopher's virtual interlocutor than some of the latter's preferred literary authors, of the likes of Rainer Maria Rilke, Georg Trakl, and Stefan George. The *Book of Disquietude*, for example, vividly expresses the titular sense of unrest (*desassossego*) in Dasein, who is painfully aware of the fact of its dispersion but, despite this awareness, refuses or is unable to overcome it by means of the Heideggerian, tragic, death-facing heroism. ("Whoever lives like me doesn't die: he terminates, wilts, devegetates,"⁸ Pessoa writes as though accepting the purely animal ending of life in "perishing," one grade below the fate of Dasein's inauthentic demise that does not merit the dignity of death in Heidegger.)⁹ I turn to Pessoa, then, so as to espy the underside of Heidegger, but also to fill in the schematic outlines of a dispersed or distracted spatiality of existence with some of the finer brushstrokes including superficiality, homelessness, and unrest.

It would be prudent to discern between two levels of superficiality in Heidegger. *On the one hand*, distraction entails a fascination with phenomenality, a thorough "immersion" and "absorption" in the shallowness of ever-changing perceptions concerned "with the possibilities of seeing the 'world' merely as it *looks*. . . . Dasein lets itself be carried along solely by the looks of the world."¹⁰ I am tempted to term this "superficial superficiality" without presuming, as one usually does, that what underlies it is a more serious, more

death, art, and being in the poetic thought and thinking poetry of Heidegger and Pessoa, the link has been recognized, in passing, by Luís de Oliveira e Silva (*O Materialismo Idealista de Fernando Pessoa* [Lisbon: Clássica, 1985]) and by Pedro Martín Lago (*Poética y Metafísica en Fernando Pessoa* [Santiago: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 1993]). While the former writer confirms that, like Heidegger, "Pessoa directs his thoughts exclusively to the 'problem of the ontological dimension of being'" (154, my translation), the latter emphasizes that "before someone like Heidegger or Sartre, Pessoa expresses the existential sense of anguish, nausea and the tedium of living" (166, my translation).

⁸ "Quem vive como eu não morre: acaba, murcha, desvegeta-se" (Fernando Pessoa, *Livro do Desassossego* [Lisbon: Assirio & Alvim, 2006], 77; translated by Richard Zenith as *The Book of Disquietude* [New York: Carcanet Press, 1996], 28); hereafter cited as *The Book of Disquietude*, followed first by English pagination, and second, if given, by Portuguese pagination. "I weep less for the moment / Than for my future self, / A null and void subject / Of the universal destiny" (Fernando Pessoa & Co., *Selected Poems*, trans. Richard Zenith [Grove Press: New York, 1998], 124).

⁹ "Dasein too can end without authentically dying, though on the other hand, *qua* Dasein, it does not simply perish. We designate this intermediate phenomenon as its '*demise*' [Ableben]" (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 291/247).

¹⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 216.

sober, more profound relation to the world. Superficial superficiality should not, however, be mistaken for one that revives the old distinction between surface appearances and deeper essences divergent from the “mere looks” of things, i.e., the very distinction put in question in all phenomenological investigations, including those of Heidegger. Although the phenomenal surface is all there is, Dasein retains the option of momentarily excusing itself from the phenomenal plane and turning to the possibility of not-being. In other words, Dasein can face the futurity of its death, emptying the “world” of everything, save for its bare worldhood and a promise of self-gathering from its distracted fascination with living. Such would be the freely and resolutely chosen counterbalance to “superficial superficiality.”

In Pessoa’s thought, the first level of distraction informs “a decorative and superficial concept of profound love”: “This is how I love: I fix my attention on a beautiful or attractive or otherwise lovable figure...and this figure obsesses, captivates, possesses me. But I only want to see it, and I don’t look at any figure that presents even a remote possibility of coming to know.”¹¹ The attention proper to a superficially profound love is obsessed, captivated, possessed, that is to say, dispersed and distracted, anti-Platonic and, perhaps, anti-philosophical. To sustain this obsession, it suffices for the lover to be carried along by the mere looks of the world, to which she surrenders her or his very capacity to know. Yet, while everyday Dasein leads a life of inauthenticity unbeknownst to it, Pessoa’s subject chooses the same kind of life, accepts the given with the added weight of responsibility for this choice and with the cognizance of his inexorable self-dispersion in distraction. His existential responsibility and “shallowness” combine thereby to produce a sense of disquietude as a meta-unrest superimposed on the restlessness and hustle-and-bustle of being in the world.

On the other hand, Heidegger postulates a certain necessary, indeed “deep,” superficiality and distraction in the divergence between mere looking and understanding. In a reading of St. Augustine in *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, he writes: “[W]hen looking at the *res*, we only pay attention to what they are (according to their content), not to what else they might indicate. And, vice versa, if I deal with a thing as a sign, I must pay attention not to what it is, but to the fact that it is a sign.”¹² If, *prima facie*, it seems that Heidegger

¹¹ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquietude*, 153. Compare with: “In me all affections take place on the surface, but sincerely” (69).

¹² Marin Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 210.

describes a splitting of attention between the surface of indicative signification and the surface of thinghood, we should moderate this initial impression with the reminder, drawn from *Being and Time*, that it is mere looking that performatively creates something present-at-hand in its failure to understand what it faces. The “thing itself,” in its independence and self-identity, is an illusion fabricated in the act of abstracting it from the total context of signification, wherein, besides relating to other things, it *becomes* this relation and, hence, something other than itself. The real fissuring transpires, in any event, between the mere looking, distracted from the meaning of that which is seen, and an equally “superficial,” active, transformative understanding that, having implicitly refused to contemplate things theoretically, elaborates on them with the help of practical hermeneutics. Attention to one surface instantly translates into distraction from the other, dooming Dasein to a vacillation between two divergent superficialities.

While, in his anti-metaphysical poetry, Alberto Caeiro (one of Pessoa’s literary personae) strives to recover mere looking in a complex, quasi-Rousseauian “denaturalization of the denaturalized” formulated in terms of “[l]essons in unlearning [*uma aprendizagem de desaprender*],”¹³ the looking and the signifying alike surrender to the exigencies of distraction. In response to the question, “What was I thinking about before I got lost in the seeing?” Pessoa whispers, with a tinge of despair, “I don’t know.”¹⁴ His dispersion in seeing countervails the self-gathering promised by thinking, and so, fully commits him to the ecstatic mode of existence outside of himself. Even the meaning-making rationale of writing turns out to be subordinate to distraction: “And I write these carelessly written lines not to say this and not to say anything, but to give my distraction something to do.”¹⁵ Writing ceases to be an instrument of expression in the service of subjective interiority and the depth of its desire. If it expresses anything at all, it is the fact that there is nothing more to express in the old paradigm of deep psychology, to press out of the psychic “well,” which, according to Pessoa’s precise metaphor, has long dried up due to the subject’s scattering outside of itself in the course of its life, which is but the process of becoming other. Instead of resulting in a paralyzing muteness, the paucity of expression conveys too much, reflecting, as it does, the emptying

¹³ Pessoa & Co., *Selected Poems*, 57.

¹⁴ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquietude*, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

exteriorization of a singular subject into the dispersion of *das Man*.¹⁶ That the distraction of mere seeing coincides with the distraction motivated by writing indicates that, for Pessoa, there is no deep superficiality, itself split into two incompatible levels competing for our attention.

Living in the tension of distraction, I am exiled outside of myself, never dwelling anywhere, all the while remaining myself (as other to who or what I am). The ecstatic nature of existence places two contradictory demands on Dasein: to be an interiority and to be in the world, or as Heidegger puts it, “even in this ‘being-outside’ alongside the object, Dasein is still ‘inside’ . . . as a being-in-the-world that knows.”¹⁷ Analogous to Pessoa, Heidegger is a reluctant Romantic at heart, which is why at the threshold of *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, he turns to Novalis’ aphorism—“Philosophy is really a homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere”¹⁸—and bestows on homesickness the dubious honor of being “the fundamental attunement of philosophizing”: “*What is that—world?* This is where we are driven [*getrieben*] in our homesickness: to being as a whole. Our very being is this restlessness [*Getriebenheit*: drivenness.—MM].”¹⁹ Not to be at home in the world is to be distracted and dispersed, or better yet, it is to be in the world, and finally, to be, to exist. Homesickness dreams of putting an end to distracted dispersion, such that its reverie inspires philosophy, setting it on the path toward “being as a whole,” gathered into one, at home with itself. But, even if philosophy is destined (*bestimmen*) and driven (*getrieben*) to come home, it does not, as Heidegger reminds us, in all actuality find itself there and must endure in the form of homesickness. The way leading back home never reaches its intended destination.

Pessoa eloquently and somewhat enigmatically defines home as “the place . . . where one doesn’t feel,” keeping in mind that “[t]o feel is to be distracted.”²⁰ It follows, then, that at home, where one does not feel, one is not distracted (let it be said in passing that philosophy has traditionally militated

¹⁶ “I suffered in me, with me, the aspirations of all eras and every disquietude of every age . . .”; “Why look at the twilights if . . . besides seeing them inside me, I myself *am them*, on the inside and the outside?”; “Our life had no inner dimension. We were outer and other” (Pessoa, *The Book of Disquietude*, 61, 128, 173).

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 89.

¹⁸ According to Blanchot, “[f]or Novalis, the mind is not agitation, disquietude, but repose (the neutral point without any contradictions” (*The Writing of Disaster*, 8). In this sense, the philosophical homesickness is not restless or agitated but melancholically nostalgic for the lost unity that has never been.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 5/8.

²⁰ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquietude*, 112; Pessoa & Co., *Selected Poems*, 78.

against distraction as much as against feeling), and, conversely, in the predicament of homelessness one feels (always in excess of one's capacity to feel) and is distracted. The matter is further complicated by Pessoa's intimation that the image of the house, emblemizing a concentrated recollection of interiority, is itself a chimera, a product of distracted imagination: "When I'm distracted, then I imagine I really have a house, a home, a place to return to."²¹ Graft this idea onto the thought of Novalis and of Heidegger, and the drivenness of philosophy—in fact: its "fundamental attunement"—will be de-mystified, disclosed as a dreamy distraction wishing itself away, conjuring up its awakening, right in the middle of the dream. In other words, attentiveness and the homesickness that supplements it do not in the least annul distraction but modulate and modify it such that, later on, Derrida will be able to invoke "an attention that my infinite distraction didn't disturb at all."²² As a consequence, there is perfect contiguity between a strictly demarcated attentive interiority, on the one hand, and a distracted state determined by exteriority as an exile of the subject into space, on the other. But, at the same time, the sense of homesickness is internally split between a dreamy distraction that tirelessly devises plans to gather up and to free itself from existential exteriority and a lucid distraction that, with a measure of irony, knows that these imaginative schemas are the sure signs of intensified self-dispersion.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas draws a parallel between the self-recollection of interiority and attention in the figure of the dwelling. The dwelling (*la demeure*) that isolates the subject from the sublimity of the element and the threatening intensity of the *jouissance* it portends is also a condition of possibility for the "movement of attention freed from immediate enjoyment [*un mouvement de l'attention affranchie de la jouissance immédiate*]."²³ In turn, the ecstasy of *jouissance*, along with the sensuousness overwhelming the subject steeped in the element, governs the counter-movement of distraction. In the "mystical format of the element," I no longer (or not yet) return to myself, bringing home the fruit I reap from enjoyment. My innocent egoism and loneliness in enjoyment²⁴ coincide, respectively, with my incapacity to relate

²¹ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquietude*, 43.

²² Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 11.

²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), 154. First published as *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'Extériorité* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990), 164–65. Hereafter cited as *Totality and Infinity*, followed first by English pagination, and second, if given, by French pagination.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

attentively to the alterity of the other person and with my dispersion in the indeterminacy of elemental exteriority.

In his condemnation of the false pathos of solitude, Levinas reacts to Heidegger's appreciation of non-relationality inherent in the possibility of my death and in the absurdity of the other dying for me, in my place. Although it does not connote an imprisonment of the subject in itself, "[s]olitude does not separate into the kind of dispersion to which all mere forsakenness is exposed. Solitude carries the soul toward the One and only, gathers it into the One."²⁵ Still, against the backdrop of Pessoa's writings, the Heideggerian gathering of the soul into the One is as unattainable as the Levinasian prioritization of the relation to the other:²⁶ the former, because of the legion of irreconcilable others in me; the latter, because the real company of other people distracts me from myself. The insufficiency of either alternative propels the unrest and disquietude of the subject who is never at home with/in itself, as much as with the others, and whose "attention is an absurdity allowed by our winged inertia."²⁷

Where, for Levinas, I lose myself at the height of my solitude, Pessoa's other literary alter-ego, Álvaro de Campos, concludes that "I lose myself if I'm distracted / From the sensations I receive."²⁸ But, if, within the logic of homelessness, feeling is tantamount to distraction, then to be distracted from my sensations is to be distracted from distraction in what is perhaps the only form of attention acceptable to Pessoa. The attention, indebted to the redoubling of distraction, results in the loss of the subjective synthesis responsible for binding together the manifold of representations, so that "I don't even know if it's I who feels [*se sou eu quem em mim sente*: if it's I who feels in myself.—MM]."²⁹ Bewildered by the noesis of feeling that, thanks to distraction, no longer

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 180.

²⁶ That is not to say that, in Heidegger's thought, the "gathering of the soul" remains untenable in light of the time lag between thrownness and projection, the I as the respondent and the I as the source of the call of conscience, while, in Levinas' philosophy, separation (and hence a certain gathering of interiority) functions as the condition of possibility for the infinite approach to the other. A critique of monadology is an integral part of Pessoa's (Caeiro's) critique of philosophy: "With philosophy there are no trees, just ideas. / There is only each one of us, like a cave. / There is only a shut window" (Pessoa & Co., *Selected Writings*, 75). The annoyance at being in the company of others is a distinguishing feature of *The Book of Disquietude*.

²⁷ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquietude*, 175.

²⁸ Pessoa & Co., *Selected Poems*, 143.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

corresponds to a unity of the felt noema,³⁰ the sentient I falls apart into a non-synthesizable multiplicity of “sub-personal processes,” performing, in lived actuality, Husserl’s phenomenological reduction. Pessoa’s literary personas (remarkably, the poet’s patronym means “person” in Portuguese) are themselves the residues of this distracted division of the I.

The third brushstroke in the portrait of the distracted and dispersed existential spatiality invokes unrest. In the course of describing being-in-the-world as falling, Heidegger calls the existential state of Dasein “tranquillizing.” “However,” he continues, “this tranquility in inauthentic Being does not seduce one into stagnation and inactivity, but drives one into uninhibited ‘hustle’ [*Betriebs*]. Being-fallen into the ‘world’ does not somehow come to rest. The tempting tranquillization *aggravates* the falling.”³¹ The dispersed way of being in the world tranquilizes by giving one the impression that one always has something to do, that what one does is significant, and that one is not at every moment left face-to-face with finite time. Tranquilization distracts Dasein from its ownmost futural possibility of death not by allowing Dasein to stagnate but by relentlessly throwing it into the active “hustle” of daily living. In spite of sharing the grammatical root with drivenness (*Getriebenheit*), the hustle (*Betrieblichkeit*) of inauthentic existence that undergoes dispersion and that refuses to linger with forbearance has nothing in common with the homesick philosophy striving to the (however impossible) unity of the One. The incapacity to dwell or to abide marks the failure of inauthentic existence to be in attendance, to be present, at all those sites where it concernfully attends to the world.

In his 1937 lectures on the eternal return of the same in Nietzsche, Heidegger nevertheless envisions two limit cases when inauthentic, impatient unrest afflicts philosophy and when Dasein rises to the authenticity of a non-dispersed drivenness. On the one hand, “nihilism proper” involves the “tranquility of...philosophical somnolence,” whereby philosophers feverishly construct conceptual systems in an effort to approximate the so-called rigor of the sciences. On the other hand, Dasein is sometimes capable of experiencing “a supreme unrest... , unrest not as distraction and confusion but as awakening

³⁰ “Some indications of this dispersion [*Zerstreuung*]. First of all, *Dasein* never relates to an object, to a sole object. If it does, it is always in the mode of abstraction or abstention from other beings which always co-appear at the same time” (Derrida, “*Geschlecht*,” 393). This observation substantiates the point that there is more than one noema in a distracted tending of intentionality, which is not an aberration but the “everyday” manner of attending to the world.

³¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 222/177–78.

and vigilance.³² Vigilant and insomniac unrest is an offshoot of the lucid anxiety marking Dasein's refusal to flee from the futurity of its death and thus to overcome dispersion without leaving the world into which it always already falls, that is, without resorting to nonworldly transcendence. Existential spatiality is here rediscovered in its temporally ecstatic structure that projects the thrownness of Dasein onto the futural limit of all projections formed by the horizon of its death. (Let us note, parenthetically, that when Dasein projects its thrownness, in the same breath, it projects dispersion, which, according to the 1928 lectures on the metaphysical foundations of logic, is rooted in the originary character of Dasein as thrown. It is in these lectures that Heidegger introduces the expression "*geworfene Zerstreuung*," a "thrown dispersion" that appeals to Dasein's lived embodiment in the world, binding it to the ecstatic mode of existence.)³³ And, conversely, one's scattering and distraction take place in the existential spatiality forgetful of time, in the everydayness of the impoverished present that lacks all references to a qualitatively different past or future and thereby instantiates a vulgar version of the eternal recurrence: "In everydayness everything is all one and the same, but whatever the day may bring is taken as diversification. . . . In everydayness Dasein can undergo dull 'suffering' . . . and evade it by seeking new ways in which its dispersion in its affairs may be further dispersed."³⁴ So interpreted, distraction spawns the illusion of multiple events, of "diversification," overlaying the fundamental sameness of the everyday. It is as though time does not pass for those absorbed in the worldly hustle rotating around the same needs, images, opinions, and so forth.

In Pessoa's work, too, the "cause" of disquietude is the crushing exteriority of life ("for me Life is whatever's external," he admits)³⁵ that affords no exemptions to the interiority of the soul exiled or subtracted from, yet ruthlessly exposed to, the thingly dimension of reality. However, the unrest assailing subjectivity bereft of a place of its own in the world to which it is confined is far from being either vigilant or tranquilizing. The impossibility of the subject's aporetic position in the existential excluded middle—excluded from everything—is coterminous with the ineluctability of a living dispersion outside oneself that turns the "self" into the absent center of onto-phenomenology,

³² Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), 104.

³³ Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik*, 174.

³⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 422.

³⁵ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquietude*, 13.

as effectively as the possibility of death does in Heidegger. And so, in words that could have been uttered by Heidegger, Pessoa writes:

Little worries as well as big problems distract us from ourselves and hinder the quietude to which we all, without knowing it, aspire. We almost always live outside ourselves. . . . But it's toward ourselves that we tend, as toward a centre around which, like planets, we trace absurd and distant ellipses.³⁶

“Little worries as well as big problems” amount to a tranquilizing busyness, a constant delving into the exteriority of life. They do not constitute, *stricto sensu*, disquietude, understood as the simultaneity of the centrifugal itinerary of life and the centripetal tendency toward the missing centre of existence. A direct effect of our distraction from ourselves—the distraction that is “primary” in that it allows a being, which is not “merely living,” to function, more or less efficiently, in the dispersed order of life—is our utmost attention to exteriority that, in its excessiveness, reverts to a “secondary” distraction from the specific elements of exteriority we attend to: “Everything interests me and nothing holds me. I attend to everything, dreaming continuously . . . but I hear without listening, I am thinking of something else.”³⁷ Secondary distraction fails to revert back to the distracted self and, instead, disseminates itself in the staggering multiplicity of the world of concern, of the intersecting adumbrations and shifting edges that momentarily captivate and release the attentive, disinterestedly curious gaze (“Everything interests me and nothing holds me”). The Heideggerian hustle and refusal to linger forbearingly announce themselves in this unrest that does not yet attain the strength of disquietude but, tending toward too much, yearns to live up to the plentitude of existential givenness in a distracted, productively futile way.

It is worth noting that, at the same time, Pessoa holds out the image of a different relation to exteriority mediated by distracted attention than the one sketched above. Rather than espouse the notion of disquietude tied to awakening and vigilance, he casts it in terms of a dreaming that shuttles between the constraints of the adumbrated exterior reality and the limited freedom of imagination: “Things are the raw material of my dreams; that’s why I apply a distractedly hyperattentive attention to certain details of the Outside.”³⁸ My goal in citing this passage is not to argue that Pessoa is, in some narrow sense, a Kantian who recognizes the potential of “*reproductive*” imagination, which

³⁶ Ibid., 129.

³⁷ Ibid., 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 169.

operates by associating sensory contents given to it in intuition.”³⁹ The dream does not yield a new synthesis of the elements intuited in the Outside but rediscovers the world of concern as the world of someone who resolutely plunges into the falling that had not been chosen and attempts to do justice to the scattering of exteriority by approaching it with a certain distractedly hyper-attentive attention. Hardly a self-gathering of the subject, this poetic move—in the Greek sense of *ποίησις*—makes the dispersion of existential spatiality resonate with the distracted attention that comprehends without grasping and that still exercises a modicum of “sovereign” selectivity (“My eyesight suppresses the aspects of things that my dreams can’t use.”)⁴⁰

To sum up, the imbrication of spatial exteriority with distraction, in Heidegger and Pessoa alike, bespeaks a dispersed mode of being in the world and its corollaries: superficiality, homelessness, and unrest. Whether it is a hallmark of philosophy (including that philosophy which acknowledges its finite place within the closure of metaphysics) to wish to overcome this dispersion at any cost, and whether it is a corresponding trait of poetic discourse to come to terms with the pulverization of being is a question that cannot be settled here. Even if possible solutions might differ, there is a remarkable consensus on the root of the problem, namely, that the attentive attitude of an embodied being lapses into distraction as soon as it gets fascinated with the exteriority in which this being always already finds itself. Derrida ironically ventriloquizes the critique of blindness that the New Testament levels against the Old, precisely with regard to the distracted attention to exteriority: “The Pharisees [...] see nothing because they look outside, only at the outside. They must be converted to interiority, their eyes turned toward the inside; and a fascination must first be denounced, the body and exteriority of the letter reproached.”⁴¹ To look outside, only at the outside, is not only to be distractedly enraptured with the kaleidoscopic transposition of the appearing things and events but also to overlook one’s interiority, to forget oneself in the sort of Nietzschean “active forgetting” that reactivates a fatigued life. In Nietzsche, what needs to be actively forgotten is, above all, the history weighing heavily on the subject’s capacity to receive and process new experiences. The oblivion, to which those who gaze exclusively at the outside consign their interiority, echoes the active

³⁹ Edward Casey, *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 132.

⁴⁰ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquietude*, 169.

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 18.

forgetting of history, insofar as it likewise stands for the absolute immersion in exteriority at the expense of time understood, phenomenologically, as the internal-time consciousness.⁴² It would be a mistake, however, to regard time as a panacea from distraction, which, as we shall see below, percolates into the most intimate core of the subject and its psychic life.

II. Temporality of Distraction (Augustine with Rousseau)

The proto-phenomenology Augustine elaborates in Book XI of his *Confessions* stages the question of time in terms of a measure (*tempus metior*) appropriate to the distention of the soul (*distentio animi*).⁴³ There is no standard and uniform way to translate *distentio*, variously rendered as the “stretching,” “lengthening,” “spreading,” and, occasionally, “distraction.” But, taking care not to impoverish the semantic suppleness of the word, we can already eliminate one of its possible senses: extension. Despite the undeniable spatial overtones it harbors, *distentio* does not tend toward exteriority, does not have a propensity to drift outwards, to expand. But neither is it wholly oriented to interiority, as though it were a deficient kind of intentionality, a fallen *intentio*. In a paraphrase of the Derridian *différance*, we could say that, for Augustine, time is a spacing of the soul, a spacing, which does not partake of the order of geometrical spatiality, since it is “not stretched out in any space [*nullo spatio tenditur*].”⁴⁴ *Distentio* is, literally, without extension, and this is not the only instance where Augustine plays on the subtle variations of the Latin verb *tendere* that recur with remarkable consistency between chapters 26 and 31 of *Confessions* XI. Let us, then, focus on the finer grains in the fabric of the

⁴² Husserl will distinguish between the exteriority of the appearing thing and the appearance of the thing in constitutive consciousness. Yet, an attentive regard may be directed “just as well . . . toward the appearance and its components as . . . toward the appearing thing” (Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, trans. James S. Churchill (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 123).

⁴³ “time is nothing else but a stretching out in length [distention. —MM]; but of what, I know not, and I marvel, if it be not of the very mind [*est nihil esse aliud tempus quam distentionem: sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi*]” (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. William Watts [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912], 268–69). Taking up Husserl’s recommendation, with which he opens *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, I turn to Augustine (and the confessional genre in philosophy in general) to trace out the nexus of time and distraction, the nexus that seems to have a privileged place in the “self-revelation” of subjective interiority.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 268–69.

Augustinian text, hinting at the primacy of dispersion and distraction in the constitution of time.

Having just mentioned the critical role of distention in the measuring of time, Augustine engages in an inner dialogue—indeed, a self-supplication—in what is a recognizable stylistic “signature” of his *Confessions*. “Courage, my mind,” he urges, “and press on strongly” [*Insiste, anime meus, et adtende fortiter* (alternatively: Insist, my soul, and attend strongly)]. God is our helper: he made us, and not we ourselves. Press on [*adtende*], where truth begins to dawn.⁴⁵ The confessor beseeches his soul (thus, himself) to overcome its dispersion in and as time and to attend to the dawning truth with the sort of fortitude that will remedy the slackening of tension signaled in *distentio*. Augustine’s performative utterance intends, above all, to transcend the multiplicity associated with time as much as with creation—“*deus . . . fecit nos*” (God . . . created us)—contrasting the plural and passive “us” to the singularity of the active soul mentioned in the exhortation, *Insiste anime meus*.⁴⁶ In this sense, the ambition of the Augustinian attention is double: to leap out of time, defined as *distention*, on one’s way to God and, stated somewhat heretically, to undo the intra-temporal and multiple order of creation.

The desire for unity, which attention would consummate, reaches its crest in the prayer at the opening of chapter 29, Book XI. Augustine starts by evocatively recounting the predicament of existence, of life itself, as distraction and dispersion: “behold, my life is a distraction [*ecce distentio est vita mea*] . . . [for] we are many, drawn in many ways, by many things.”⁴⁷ Far removed from divine unity, the life of creatures is lived as a distracted hyper-intentionality, tending in too many directions at the same time, and is, put anachronistically in Heidegger’s terms, fascinated with exteriority. Distention is inseparable from life, just as it is integral to the genesis of time, but while in the former case it is the subject of the sentence, in the latter it stands in the position of a predicate. In keeping with elementary logic, then, if time is the distention of the soul and distention is “my life,” then time is the life of the soul, a life lived in harmony with the principle of multiplicity governing all creation.

Augustine, nonetheless, craves a higher accord with the divine, praying that

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Of course, the very fact of this inner dialogue betrays a certain splitting of the self and undermines the appeal to the unity of the soul.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 278–79.

I may be gathered up . . . to follow that One and to forget what is behind: not distracted but attracted, stretching forth not to what shall be and shall pass away, but to those things which are before: not, I say, distractedly but intently [*non distentus, sed extentus, non secundum distentionem, sed secundum intentionem*].⁴⁸

For the purpose of the prayer, distention is opposed to extension, my “stretching forth,” *extentus*, on the one hand, and to intention, on the other. Both extension and intention abide after the suspension of time in its past and future modalities (“what shall be and shall pass away”) and amount to an attentive, extra-temporal approach to the eternal presence of the divine. Dialectically speaking, the “true” attention paid to God, in the aftermath of the reductive suspension of time, is a negation of the negation, canceling out the harmful effects of the distracted, intra-temporal attention that triggers the dissipation (*distentio*) of the soul. The lesson implicit in Augustine’s prayer is that a deeper sense of attention requires that one turn away from earthly life (which presupposes the soul’s dispersion) toward God’s “loving kindness,” *miserericordia*, “better than life itself.”⁴⁹ Henceforth, attention will be an integral part of religion,⁵⁰ which re-binds, *re-ligare*, the link between the Creator and the created and, in so doing, tightens the soul’s own slackening cords.

Against the background of this promising beginning, the melancholy conclusion of the prayer betokens the futility of a struggle against distraction and against the temporal order that originates along with it.⁵¹ In contrast to the divine extra-temporal attention, dwelling in the eternal present,⁵² the human capacity to attend to something is a moment in the temporal flow situated between remembrance and expectation that, in combination, produce *distentio animi*. The dispersion resulting from distention does not, to be sure, preclude what phenomenology names “passive synthesis”; rather, it precedes—if one may still talk about “precession” or what is “before” in the movement of

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 278–79.

⁴⁹ “*melior est misericordia tua super vitas*” (Ibid.).

⁵⁰ In the twentieth century alone, the thinkers who focus on the religious significance of attention include Gabriel Marcel, Simone Weil, and Emmanuel Levinas.

⁵¹ “But now are my years spent in mourning, and thou, my Comfort, O Lord, my Father, art everlasting; but I fall into dissolution amid the changing times [*at ego in tempora dissilui*]” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 280–81).

⁵² “Nor does God’s attention pass from one thought to another; all things which he knows are present at the same time to his incorporeal vision. He knows events in time without any temporal acts of knowledge” (Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson [London: Penguin, 1972], 452).

temporalization—the analytic distinction between analysis and synthesis to the extent that it gathers the three temporal modalities in a self-disseminating configuration:

For it [the soul] expects, it marks attentively [*adtentit*], it remembers; that so the thing which it expecteth, through that which attentively it marketh, passes into that which it remembereth. . . . But yet our attentive marking continues [*perdurat attentio*] so that that which shall be present proceedeth to become absent.⁵³

Presaging Heidegger's interpretation of attention as one of the dispersed and concerned ways of being-in-the-world,⁵⁴ Augustine inscribes this mental state within the transitory order of temporal existence, where it functions as a mediator between presence and absence, expectation and memory. Paradoxically, then, the intensification of finite human attention leads to a heightening of distraction or, at the very least, to a rise in tension between attention and distraction; the attempt at transcendence swathes the subject in immanence.⁵⁵ Attention endures (*perdurat attentio*) only as an outlet for non-endurance, for the becoming-absent of whatever has been present.

When it comes to the cognates of the Latin *tendere*, Augustine's farewell gesture in Book XI of the *Confessions* is an appeal, addressed to those who question the nature of divine time before creation, to realize that temporality is part and parcel of the creaturely mode of existence, not of the Creator's

⁵³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 276–77.

⁵⁴ One of the commentators who has observed the Augustinian influence on Heidegger in this regard is Paul Ricoeur (*Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990]), who asks regarding being-in-the-world: "How then could anything remain of the Augustinian aporia of *distentio animi* robbed of cosmological support?" (62). See also, Philippe Capelle's "Heidegger: Reader of Augustine," in *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession*, ed. John Caputo and Michael Seanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 122ff. Finally, at the philological level, a medieval Latin-French dictionary, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*, ed. Jan Frederik Niermeyer (Leiden: Brill, 1976), substantiates the sense of *distentio* both as a distraction and as *souci*, or the German *Besorge*, an absorbing concern: "**distentio**: *distraction, souci, occupation*—trouble, reason of anxiety, absorbing concern" (342).

⁵⁵ In a similar vein, Herman Parret (*Le Sublime du Quotidien* [Paris: Hadès-Benjamins, 1988]) conceptualizes distention as the tension between distraction and attention: "Augustin . . . décrit, grandiosement, l'expérience intérieure du temps en situant la dimension existentielle du temps dans la *tension (distentio animi)* entre distraction et concentration, entre mémoire et attente [Augustine . . . described, in a grandiose way, the inner experience of time by situating the existential dimension of time in the tension (*distentio animi*) between distraction and concentration, between memory and expectation]" (152).

Being. All time is, strictly speaking, the time of creation, multiplicity, and dispersion, but in order to reach this acumen, one ought to turn the *distentio* of one's own soul into an *extensio*, a "stretching forth" toward the supra-temporal being of God: "Let them stretch forth [*extendatur*] rather towards those things which are before; and understand thee the eternal Creator of all times to have been before all times."⁵⁶ In other words, time should not be comprehended either temporally, in the absence of references to the eternity of God, or non-temporally, since the stretching forth to what is before the distinction between "before" and "after" does not accomplish a break with the *distentio* but only modifies this inalienable state of the soul. To extend one's attention to the divine is to be, at the same time, attentive to and distracted from time in its co-origination with distraction.

What is it, exactly, that Augustine (and, in his footsteps, the other philosophers writing in the confessional genre) does when he insists on the doggedness of the temporal, creaturely, human existence by distraction? Within the confessional discourse that gives birth to the very interiority it uncovers, does not distraction mercilessly interrupt the attentive recuperation of inner life and, thereby, delimit the confession?⁵⁷ Now, these limits undoubtedly belong to the order of the soul itself, whose temporal distention, far from a catastrophic accident befalling it from the outside, is that which is most living in it: time as the very life of the soul. Instead of impeding the project of the philosophical confessions and threatening the gathering of interiority into a coherent whole, the marginal references to distraction reflect the dispersion of psychic life in all its opaqueness more faithfully than does the concentrated and attentive recovery of this life. That the confessional act transcends understanding⁵⁸ is due partly to the faith, proclaiming its independence from the realm of the knowable, and partly to the fact that the soul, in its non-transparency to itself, necessarily exceeds its attentive recuperation.

⁵⁶) Augustine, *Confessions*, 280–81.

⁵⁷) Thus, Foucault indulges in an oversimplification when he claims that in the confessional discourse a "relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of the self was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing" (Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 1 ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 232–33). More than attention, it is distraction that has "intensified and widened" the experience of the self in confession.

⁵⁸) "Let him that understandeth confess unto thee; and let him that understandeth not confess unto thee also" (Augustine, *Confessions*, 285).

In light of the obstinate persistence of distraction both in subjective interiority and in the discourse that “denudes” it (this denuding distinguishes confessions from an auto-biographical writing), the incipient movements of *The Confessions* where Rousseau addresses God in saying, “I have unveiled my interiority such as You have seen it Yourself [*j’ai dévoilé mon intérieur tel que tu l’as vu toi-même*],”⁵⁹ hide a conundrum. For, how would it be possible to unveil one’s interiority, constituted as distraction and dispersion, except by barely outlining its contours, or formally indicating it, to resort to Heidegger’s terminology? The successive transformation of Rousseau’s psyche into an object of the gaze (first, of God; second, of Jean-Jacques; third, of his reader) runs the risk of interfering with the ambition of unveiling the depths of the soul, of getting “inside and under the skin”, *intus et in cute*, as the epigraph to *The Confessions* mandates, because what it reveals is a certain profound superficiality, distraction inseparable from one’s “habit of being”: “*Au fort d’une certaine habitude d’être, un rien me distrait, me change, m’attache . . . ; et alors tout est oublié, je ne songe plus qu’au nouvel objet qui m’occupe.*”⁶⁰ I limit myself to a reading of this early extract from Rousseau’s text along with its contextual frame.

The ontologically rooted distraction, one that shapes the very being of the subject of *The Confessions*, is driven by “a mere nothing,” *un rien*, which is not quite “nothing” but the books Jean-Jacques feels drawn to in such a way that his longing to read supplants his desire to steal. He continues: “*Le coeur me battait d’impatience de feuilleter le nouveau livre que j’avais dans la poche; je . . . ne songeais plus à fouiller le cabinet de mon maître.*”⁶¹ The heart beating in excitement and the pocket, wherein the book awaits its being read, are the indicators that, besides distracting Rousseau from the dream of “rummaging through my master’s cabinet,” reading replicates certain features of stealing. Although the excitement (with all its accoutrements) remains, it is now derived through different means: “*je ne faisais plus que lire, je ne volais plus.*”⁶² Reading distracts

⁵⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions: Livres I à IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 34. Compare with Rousseau’s admission in a piece of personal correspondence: “Les distractions des objets extérieurs y sont trop longues y trop fréquents; on ne peut y jouir d’un peu de solitude et de tranquillité [The distractions of external objects are both more prolonged and more frequent; I cannot enjoy a little solitude and tranquility]” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Collection complète des oeuvres de J.-J. Rousseau, citoyen de Genève*, tome XXXI (Genève, 1782–89), 205); my translation.

⁶⁰ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 73: “Thanks to a certain habit of being, a mere nothing distracts me, changes me, fascinates me . . . ; and so everything is forgotten and all I dream about is the new object of my preoccupation.”

⁶¹ *Ibid.*: “My heart would be beating with impatience to begin leafing through the new book in my pocket; I . . . would no longer dream of rummaging through my master’s cabinet.”

⁶² *Ibid.*: “I did nothing but read [and] I did not steal anymore.”

Jean-Jacques from stealing and from a preoccupation with money, but in so doing, it inaugurates the unique temporality of the confessions, intended for another Reader and for other readers. The vertiginous chain of supplementary replacements⁶³ of reading, “*lire*,” for stealing and of stealing for madness, “*délire*,” internally dislocates the present both by inflecting its simplicity with a repetition of the forbidden act in a sublimated form (albeit still punished with the master’s beatings) and by interjecting the reader of *The Confessions*, who “steals” her or his way into Jean-Jacques’s psyche, into the place of Rousseau who has written them. What does the author imply, then, when he says that, while reading, he was “[*b*]orné au moment présent,” absorbed in the present moment, to the point of forgetting to procure any money for future necessities?⁶⁴ Are we to infer that this moment, when the concerns of the everyday have become insignificant, belongs to the temporality of reading, of the stealing it represents, of the confessional reminiscence *about* reading, or to all of the above? The absorption in the present that the confessions attempt to recuperate and re-appropriate is the effect of a distracted fascination with “a mere nothing,” with the act of reading that harkens back to the singular act of stealing and is projected forward to the writing of the text at hand. In this seemingly banal passage, we are faced with nothing less than the “ecstatic temporality,” to use Heidegger’s expression once again, of Rousseau’s text, where distraction traverses the chain of substitutions and permits the psyche to flee the objectifying gaze right in the midst of its “denuding.”

III. Distracted Intersubjectivity

By way of concluding, let us entertain the question regarding the ethical implications of distraction, that is to say, the question of how and to what extent this psychic mode respects the alterity of the other, including of the I as its own other. If dispersion is, as we have seen, the fate of any act of attention paid within temporal and spatial immanence, then the entire life of consciousness is absorbed into the vortex of distraction.⁶⁵ Ultimately, this spells out the impossibility of 1) thematizing the “object” of consciousness—be it my own self, to which I pay attention, for instance, in confessional discourse, 2) fixing

⁶³ For the logic of the supplement in Rousseau, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁶⁴ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 73–74.

⁶⁵ For a more detailed argument associating attention and the life of consciousness, see my essay, “What Is Living and What Is Dead in Attention?” *Research in Phenomenology*, 39 no. 1 (2009), 29–51.

it in a circular noetic-noematic relation, and 3) teleologically determining the movement of a noetic act toward the noema that would perfectly correspond to it. The epistemic concerns of phenomenology thus overlap with the ethical question of respect: Do the twin impossibilities of thematizing and attentively fixing an object neglect and, hence, disrespect the latter's singularity (which, actually, singularizes intentional consciousness itself), or do they, on the contrary, dissolve the totalizing effects of thematization and disallow the imposition of formal unity onto an object? And what if I am distracted not only from my own psychic interiority and not from a thing that brushes the margins of my phenomenological world but from another person, who is never a part of this world? Does my attitude violate the alterity of this person or does it, rather, respect her otherness by not turning it into a theme, into something to be known, whether theoretically or practically? Since, on the epistemological level, such knowledge can never be attained directly by means of the intuition that could bring back to me the evidence of something present in my world, the "bonus" added to my respectful distraction from the other would be the acknowledgement that her otherness is not thematizable and does not fall under the purview of the theoretical attitude. Finally, if distraction is mutual and if it unobtrusively regulates an encounter of two or more subjects, then could it serve as a concrete instance of the Levinasian and Derridian *rapport sans rapport*, "relation without relation,"⁶⁶ designating the ethical bond, where the unbinding, the disengagement, or the absolution from the other comes to pass?

A reading of the ethical consequences of distraction following the trajectory I have outlined would, undoubtedly, go against the grain of Levinas' text.⁶⁷ *Totality and Infinity* expresses the (rather traditional) counterpoint to any attempt to tease out the ethical implications of distraction, claiming that "[i]t is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself [*j'assiste à moi-même*]. An existence called objective . . . does not express me, but precisely dissimulates me [*me dissimule*]."⁶⁸ The approach to the other mediates my attention to myself as successfully as turning away from alterity—as though such turning away were ever possible—"dissimulates," disperses, and disseminates my interiority, for example, by expressing it in the works through which I shape and inscribe my signature upon the objective world. In both cases, however, the

⁶⁶ See, for example, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 79.

⁶⁷ For an elaboration on the question of attention in Levinas, see my recent article, "A Levinasian Ethics of Attention," *Phainomenon: Revista de Fenomenologia* 18/19 (Spring and Fall 2011): 27–40.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 178/194.

ultimate point of reference is my ipseity, to which I return after a detour toward or away from the other. Levinas' implicit argument against self-dissimulation insists on associating it with the rejection of ethical responsibility, the very responsibility that invests, precipitates, or subjectivizes the subject in the first place. As a rejoinder to the above argument, the immanently critical move of situating distraction within the context of Levinas' ethical thought will reveal that this state of consciousness enables one better to embark on the adventure leading toward radical exteriority and foreclosing a Hegelian homecoming of the subject back to itself. In a nutshell, then, my working hypothesis is that distraction guards against a violent "reduction" of the other and is one of the most ethically sensitive approaches—indeed, a non-approach—to alterity imaginable.

Maurice Blanchot, who so often exhibits the greatest intellectual affinity to Levinas, parts ways with him precisely on the subject of distraction, writing that "there is the more passive inattention which, beyond any interest or calculation, lets the other be other, leaving them outside of the sphere of violence by which they would be caught, grasped, snared, identified, reduced to sameness."⁶⁹ In the attitude of inattention, I am not absorbed in my thoughts, narcissistically beholding my own interiority. The "more passive inattention," an expression that resonates with Levinas' radical passivity in excess of the opposition between the passive and the active, turns the subject inside out, exposes him or her to alterity, and creates an alliance with the other in distraction. More receptive than intentional consciousness, defined from the outset by its "acts," inattention is able to welcome and accommodate the other better, without interfering with—projecting itself onto, molding, or preparing for subjective recognition, or else, in Blanchot's language, ensnaring, grasping, identifying, etc.—the alterity of the other.

Moreover, distraction can be reciprocal, though not as symmetrical as the attention-laden mutual recognition. When, in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, Heidegger specifies a "thrown dispersion [*geworfene Zerstreung*]" of Dasein in terms of its "being-with" (*Mitsein*),⁷⁰ he hints at the possibility of turning distraction into the mood or the attunement that grounds Dasein's ontic relationality as such. The distracted being-with of Dasein is its quotidian manner of relating to others in a non-thematizing way, without expressing anything or formally communicating a preconceived "message" and without joining a totalizing collectivity. For Heidegger, this quite vulgar modality of

⁶⁹ Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, 53–54.

⁷⁰ Heidegger, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik*, 174.

Mitsein most likely betokened something like modern massification, the experience of anonymous being in an equally anonymous crowd. But, in more positive terms, the distracted being-with may describe the pre-social and pre-thematic bond to others, constituting the core of Levinasian ethics. Before the enactment of social relations governed by conventional cultural codes or, more pompously put, by the historicity of a common destiny, Dasein finds itself in a factual predicament of “bodiliness,” “physicality,” “*Leiblichkeit*” that both isolates and draws it together with the dispersed multiplicity of others. Thrown dispersion is, therefore, the most material way of being-with-others, minimally dependent on the mediations of attentive consciousness as their negative modification.

(To draw yet another parallel: this absence of thematization—of attention—which bypasses consciousness, is the very feature that psychoanalysis tacitly acknowledges in the pairing of the patient’s free association and the floating attention of the analyst. The analytic situation is a therapeutic exercise in the creation of a distracted intersubjectivity and of bodily being-with that delves below the hyper-attentive vigilance of the repressive apparatus and reconstructs the analysand’s ontic relationality in the transference and counter-transference of distraction. The analyst and the analysand will achieve psychoanalytic success, only provided that they relate to one another in a reciprocally distracted manner in what is tantamount to a reconstitution of the pre-social and pre-thematic bond to the other.)

No one has perfected the theory and practice of what I have tentatively termed “distracted intersubjectivity” more than Fernando Pessoa. In the poignant Fragment 44 of *The Book of Disquietude*, the poet speaks of the “slumber of voluntary attention,” *um sono da atenção voluntária*, that prevents him from articulating himself in words but also from desiring, hoping, representing in general. More pertinently, this “soulless state,” *este estado de falta de alma*, is attuned to the inattention of others, in which it passively and unconsciously recognizes itself; aside from this recognition, the pervasive soullessness has no external manifestations: “I notice this by what the others do not notice [*reparo por o que os outros não reparam*].”⁷¹ The “slumber of voluntary attention” matches the others’ failure to notice it—the failure, presumably explainable by the analogical extension of the same slumber to the others—while the sole spark of the author’s discerning vigilance registers their inattention to this slumber.

⁷¹ Pessoa, *The Book of Disquietude*, 29178–79.

Consistent with the methodological recommendations of phenomenology, Pessoa describes the ontic relationality of Dasein in its non-thematizable everydayness. The subject's soullessness signals a lack of interior depth and, therefore, the impossibility of self-absorption at the expense of distraction from exteriority. Still, for all intents and purposes, this autistic and non-communicative state is compatible with the existence of others who are equally distracted and who remain other, thanks to their reciprocal inattention. There is no secret dimension of depth, to which the *noumenon* of alterity could be entrusted: Pessoa's distracted relationality might be pictured as a fleeting moment when two or more subjective surfaces, pulled in various directions, brush, often without any intentional comportment on their part and without violating each other's freedom. That is why, faithful to this model of intersubjectivity that strangely corresponds to the ethical "relation without relation," the poet dreams of the presence of the other "with a special distraction [*uma distração especial*], which all . . . analytic attention is unable to define."⁷²

A later textual instant in *The Book of Disquietude* echoes the ontic relationality of distraction first introduced in Fragment 44: "I see nothing, or rather, I look all around and see the way everyone sees."⁷³ The scattering of the gaze, overwhelmed by the plentitude of the environing world, evokes the Heideggerian attitude of circumspection (*Umsicht*), corresponding to the environment (*Umwelt*), wherein Dasein always already finds itself. To "look all around" is to face the horizon and the rounding of one's phenomenological world (the rounding denoted in the German prefix *Um-*), at the expense of seeing a single object targeted by an attentive gaze. Looking all around, Pessoa sees nothing because he visually registers too much, not only on the side of the seen but also on the side of the seer, who, ultimately, includes "everyone." In a quasi-transcendental approach to the *way* everyone sees, he puts himself in the place of *das Man* and, in so doing, participates in the generality of vision proper to "the they." It is this elected participation in the inauthentic world of *das Man* that structures Pessoa's distracted intersubjectivity and quietly challenges the Heideggerian ideal community of those who heroically face their finitude.

⁷² Ibid., 31/81.

⁷³ Ibid., 159.

