6
The Surprise of Non-Sense¹

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Summary

This chapter weaves together surprise and non-sense in order to reveal how they reciprocally enlighten and extend each other anew. It is shown first that they share a core minimal structural common point, namely a broken time-dynamics, that is, the experience of a rupture in the time-embedded flowing continuity. Building such a common ground then allows us to situate the peculiar emotional component in both surprise and non-sense, guided by the hypothesis that emotion does not cover the same scope and intensity in each case, being more radical and negatively polarized in non-sense, more daily and irreducible to valence in surprise. As a third and final step, the cognitive aspect inherent in both phenomena is explored, both its commonality as opened indeterminacy, and also their contrasted cognitive dynamics, which will finally lead us to offer some insights about the crossed relationship between enaction and phenomenology.

¹ The following contribution was inspired by a talk I gave at the Husserl-Archives (ENS-CNRS) under the title “L’inscription de la surprise dans la phénoménologie des émotions de Edmund Husserl” in the framework of the ANR project EMCO-Emphiline “La surprise au sein de la spontanéité des émotions: un vecteur de cognition élargie” (2012–2015) I am currently directing. The talk was given during the first session (4/10/2013) of the seminar “Emotions et volitions” that I co-organize with M. Gyemant. It is available in its original oral form in French online: http://129.199.13.46/spip.php?article492, and will be published in the journal Alter in an upcoming volume about surprise. A Spanish version is forthcoming in the proceedings of Pensar el Cuerpo: Encuentro Internacional de Filosofía, which was organized by Leonardo Verano in Colombia in November 2013.
6.1 Introduction

Such a title may appear truly intriguing, if not “surprising”! How, indeed, could a nonsensical event be a surprise, since I won’t even be able to understand it? And, conversely, how could the surprise I am preparing for you this evening be said to be “nonsensical”, since it is full of meaningful affective and relational intentions directed towards you? Have surprise and non-sense got something in common? Is not the latter definitely the impossibility of sense-giving and sense-making, a radical irreducibility to sense (madness, absurdity), which gives way to either logical or existential issues (paradoxes or suicide), whereas surprise is spontaneously a daily bodily and emotional experience? While entering into such a preliminary analysis, do you feel, my reader, that I begin to free you from your initial puzzlement?

Let us say, again, in order not to leave you in such an uncomfortable state for too long (besides one that is undistinguishably surprising and nonsensical...), that my initial insight is the following: “The Surprise of Non-Sense” may be understood in two contrasted ways, in association with the grammatical use of the expression as a subjective genitive or as an objective one. In the following I will explore both hypotheses, insofar as they offer the opportunity to enrich both notions: is it that surprise equates to non-sense, bringing about a coextensivity of both notions and experiences, enriching each other, or is it that non-sense is a particular form of surprise, more directly cognitively embedded in a relationship with the meaning and the understanding of problematicity and also more obviously negatively oriented, insofar as there would be an irreducibility of surprise uncovered by the scope of non-sense?

Surprise is not a regular theme in philosophy, and, when it is thematized, it somehow occurs indirectly, through other concepts. Descartes, for example, in §70 of Passions of the Soul (1649/1985) broaches it via the exemplary and unique passion of admiration he defines as a “sudden surprise of the soul”.\(^2\) Kant, in turn, mentions it in passing in the framework of his approach to affect in his Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (1798/1983) §74, where Affekt is defined as “Überraschung durch Empfindung” (in line with Lessing (1841, p. 40): “das Schrecken in der Tragödie ist weiter nichts als die plötzliche Überraschung des

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\(^2\) Adam Smith (1795/1980), just like Diderot in his article “Admiration” in the Encyclopédie, will then introduce a difference between surprise and admiration, the latter being linked to beauty and exclusively positive, which is not the case for surprise, but this difference will lead them to reducing the Cartesian scope of admiration as the princeps of passion without any contrary.