

How is ethical priority possible? — The ethical turn in Levinas's concept of temporality

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Abstract. Levinas's claim that ethics precedes ontology fundamentally depends upon a radical reconfiguration of temporality. While classical phenomenology, particularly in Husserl and Heidegger, understands temporality as the condition for consciousness or the disclosure of Being, such conceptions remain structurally centered upon subjectivity and therefore fail to account for the originary status of ethical responsibility. Against this tradition, Levinas relocates the origin of time within the encounter with the Other, transforming temporality from a neutral horizon of experience into the very condition of ethical obligation. The notions of the face, the immemorial past, and diachrony reveal a temporal structure in which responsibility precedes freedom, intentionality, and self-consciousness. Rather than unfolding as a continuous succession of past, present, and future, ethical temporality emerges through interruption, asymmetry, and irreducible alterity. Such a reconstruction not only redefines subjectivity as fundamentally responsive to the Other but also provides the temporal foundation for Levinas's conception of ethics as first philosophy. Ethical temporality, therefore, constitutes not a secondary theme within Levinas's thought but the structural principle through which the transition from ontology to ethics becomes philosophically intelligible, while simultaneously opening a new phenomenological perspective on the relationship between time, subjectivity, and ethical responsibility.

Keywords: Levinas, temporality, phenomenology, ethics, the Other

1. Introduction

Within the phenomenological tradition, time has long been regarded as a fundamental dimension of philosophical inquiry. Whether understood through the constitution of conscious experience or the disclosure of Being, temporality functions as the condition through which meaning and existence become intelligible. However, within these accounts, ethical relations—particularly responsibility for the Other—are rarely considered as intrinsic to the structure of time itself. Instead, ethics tends to appear only after a temporal framework centered on subjectivity or Being has already been established. This raises a fundamental question: if ethical responsibility is unconditional and irreducible to the subject's initiative, can it be grounded within a temporality organized around self-presence?

It is precisely this tension that motivates Levinas's thesis that ethics precedes ontology. This thesis does not merely indicate a shift in philosophical priority but challenges the temporal foundations underlying traditional ontology. If time remains a neutral horizon for the constitution of subjectivity or the disclosure of Being, ethics

inevitably becomes secondary. Levinas therefore develops the notion of ethical temporality, relocating the origin of time from the interiority of the subject to the encounter with the Other. Through concepts such as the face, alterity, and the immemorial past, he reveals temporality as a discontinuous structure shaped by responsibility rather than as a homogeneous flow of consciousness.

This study takes ethical temporality as its central theme and examines how Levinas establishes the priority of ethics through a transformation of temporal structures. It first analyzes the ethical limitations of traditional phenomenological accounts of time, then reconstructs the genesis of ethical temporality, and finally explores its implications for subjectivity, responsibility, and first philosophy. The article argues that ethical temporality is not a marginal concept in Levinas's thought but the fundamental condition that makes his ethical project possible.

2. The structural limits of traditional phenomenological accounts of time: problematizing the ethical dimension

Temporality occupies a constitutive position in twentieth-century phenomenology. By bringing the question of time to the center of philosophical reflection, phenomenology challenged the traditional conception of time as an external measure or an objective succession of moments. Yet this transformation also raises a more fundamental question: if temporality constitutes the condition for the constitution of meaning or the disclosure of Being, how can it accommodate an ethical relation whose defining feature is precisely its irreducibility to the subject? The problem is not that phenomenology simply neglects ethics, but that its dominant accounts of temporality tend to organize temporal experience around the constitution or self-understanding of the subject. Within such a structure, the Other may become an object of philosophical inquiry, but cannot easily become the originary source of temporality itself.

2.1. Husserl: internal time-consciousness and the temporal constitution of subjectivity

Husserl's most systematic treatment of temporality appears in his analyses of internal time-consciousness. Through phenomenological reduction, he shifts the question of time away from an objective sequence existing independently of consciousness and toward the temporal structure through which experience itself becomes possible. His analysis of retention, primal impression, and protention demonstrates that temporal experience cannot be understood as a succession of isolated "nows". Rather, consciousness maintains the continuity of experience through the interplay of retention of what has just elapsed, impression of the present, and anticipation of what is about to occur. Temporality is therefore not itself an object within experience but a constitutive condition of experience.

The significance of this structure lies above all in its capacity to secure the continuity and identity of consciousness. Retention preserves the just-past within the living present, while protention opens consciousness toward what is about to occur. Through this temporal synthesis, an object can be apprehended as remaining the same throughout changing appearances, and meaning can be constituted as stable and intelligible. Temporality thus performs a constitutive function: it enables consciousness to maintain itself as a continuous stream while simultaneously organizing its experience into a unified horizon.

This conception is inseparable from Husserl's broader attempt to address the problem of transcendence inherited from modern philosophy. Descartes established the certainty of the cogito while simultaneously intensifying the philosophical difficulty of explaining how consciousness can reach what lies outside itself. Husserl responds by emphasizing intentionality: consciousness is always consciousness of something, and what transcends consciousness is given through intentional acts. In this sense, transcendence is constituted

within immanence rather than posited as an absolute exteriority beyond consciousness. As one commentator observes, Husserl's phenomenology understands transcendent objects as beings constituted as "for me" within the intentional sphere [1].

Although Husserl's later analyses of intersubjectivity sought to move beyond an exclusively monadic conception of consciousness, this development does not fundamentally alter the point of departure of his account of temporality. The Other must still enter the phenomenological field through structures such as empathy and analogical apperception, and the temporal experience of the Other remains accessible within the unified temporal horizon constituted by consciousness. The Other, therefore, does not appear as an absolutely heterogeneous source of temporality but as something that becomes intelligible within an already constituted temporal order. Temporality remains primarily oriented toward the constitution of meaning by consciousness. Ethical relations are not thereby excluded, but they cannot occupy an originary position, since the temporal structure within which they appear has already been constituted through subjective experience.

The limitation at stake here is therefore structural rather than merely thematic. Husserl's phenomenology provides a sophisticated account of temporal constitution, but its constitutive framework makes it difficult to conceive of an Other whose ethical significance precedes the subject's constituting activity. If temporality is fundamentally the continuity through which consciousness constitutes experience and maintains its identity, responsibility for the Other cannot yet function as the origin of temporal experience. The ethical relation consequently remains derivative of a more fundamental structure of subjective constitution.

2.2. Heidegger: ontological temporality and the disclosure of Dasein's Being

Heidegger's analysis of temporality represents a decisive transformation of the Husserlian framework. Rather than beginning with transcendental consciousness, *Being and Time* interprets temporality through an ontological analysis of Dasein. Time is no longer primarily the structure through which consciousness constitutes objects; it becomes the fundamental mode through which Dasein exists and understands its Being. Temporality is therefore not an external succession but the ecstatic structure through which Dasein is opened to its own possibilities.

This transformation is particularly evident in Heidegger's account of the ecstatic unity of future, having-been, and present. Among these dimensions, the future enjoys a distinctive ontological priority. Dasein exists by projecting itself toward its possibilities, and authentic temporality emerges when Dasein confronts its ownmost and unsurpassable possibility—death. The future, understood through *Zu-kunft* as a "coming-toward", therefore does not designate a later point on a chronological sequence but the coming of Dasein toward itself through its own possibilities. Without such ecstatic projection, possibility risks being reduced to a merely determinate potentiality already governed by an established telos; correspondingly, the present becomes an impoverished form of actuality rather than a genuine temporal opening [2]. Temporality consequently assumes a foundational ontological function: through authentic temporal existence, Dasein retrieves itself from inauthenticity and comes to understand its own Being.

Heidegger's account thus succeeds in moving beyond the subjectivist model in which time is constituted by consciousness. Yet this ontological deepening also reveals a different limitation from the perspective of ethics. Although *Being and Time* introduces *Mitsein* to indicate that others are constitutive of Dasein's being-in-the-world, the significance of others remains subordinate to the existential analytic of Dasein. Others are encountered as beings with whom Dasein shares a world, but *Mitsein* does not yet establish the asymmetrical relation in which another person addresses me with an unconditional ethical demand.

This distinction is crucial. The problem is not that Heidegger excludes other human beings from his analysis, but that the relation to others is primarily articulated through the ontological structure of Dasein. The

question remains how Dasein exists with others and understands its Being-with, rather than how the Other places me under an obligation that precedes my own existential possibilities. Even where others enter the analysis, temporality continues to function primarily as the condition through which Dasein discloses and understands its own existence.

Heidegger's later movement from Dasein toward the Fourfold (Geviert) further shifts attention toward the gathering of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities within the unity of the thing. This development deepens the ontological and world-disclosive dimensions of his thought but does not provide a basis for an asymmetrical ethical relation with the Other. As one commentator notes, the relation among human beings is placed after the relations between humans and earth, sky, and divinities [3]. The perspective of Levinas's ethical philosophy, the Other therefore remains insufficiently understood as the source of an irreducible responsibility.

2.3. From subjective constitution to ontological disclosure: the shared structural limit of phenomenological temporality

The differences between Husserl and Heidegger should not obscure the deeper structural affinity between their accounts of temporality. Husserl understands time through the constitutive activity of transcendental consciousness, whereas Heidegger understands it through the ecstatic existence of Dasein. The former emphasizes the constitution of meaning; the latter, the disclosure of Being. Nevertheless, in both cases, temporality remains fundamentally related to the subject's own mode of constitution or existence.

This shared structure can be expressed in two distinct forms. In Husserl, temporal synthesis secures the continuity of consciousness and makes the constitution of stable meaning possible. In Heidegger, ecstatic temporality opens Dasein toward its own possibilities and enables it to understand its Being. Thus, although phenomenology moves from transcendental consciousness to existential ontology, temporality remains oriented toward the intelligibility of the subject or Dasein itself.

It is from this structural perspective that Levinas's criticism of Husserl becomes significant. Levinas argues that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology ultimately remains within a philosophy of immanence because the Other and every transcendent entity are traced back to the constituting activity of transcendental consciousness. As Levinas observes, the other person who makes this relation possible is first constituted for a monadic thought. The foundation of objectivity is constituted within a purely subjective process [4]. This sense, transcendence risks being absorbed into intentionality, while the independence of the Other is reduced to its status as a correlate of consciousness. Levinas therefore associates this orientation with a philosophy of totality that cannot adequately preserve the absolute exteriority of the Other [1].

His criticism of Heidegger is more ambivalent. Levinas recognizes the originality of Heidegger's analysis in breaking with the conception of time as a succession of objective moments and in revealing temporality as an originary structure of existence. Yet he argues that Heideggerian temporality remains tied to the paradigm of freedom, self-projection, and appropriation. Through authentic temporality, Dasein retrieves and appropriates its own Being, thereby remaining oriented toward itself [2]. Even Mitsein, despite its recognition of others, does not establish the face-to-face asymmetry through which responsibility becomes primary. The Other remains within the horizon of Dasein's ontological understanding rather than interrupting that horizon from an irreducible exteriority.

The significance of this comparison is therefore not to establish that Husserl and Heidegger simply "ignore" ethics. Rather, it is to identify a structural limit shared by their respective accounts of temporality: neither allows the Other to function as the originary source of temporal experience. In Husserl, the Other enters a temporal order constituted by consciousness; in Heidegger, others belong to the ontological structure of being-with. In neither case does responsibility for the Other constitute the temporal relation itself.

This limitation becomes decisive once ethics is understood in Levinas's strong sense as unconditional and asymmetrical responsibility. If responsibility arises only after a subject has constituted itself or understood its own Being, then responsibility remains dependent upon a more fundamental subjective or ontological structure. Such a temporality cannot adequately explain why the subject can be responsible before it has freely chosen to assume responsibility. The difficulty therefore lies deeper than the absence of an ethical theme: it concerns whether the temporal structure itself can accommodate an ethical relation that precedes subjectivity.

The difficulty, however, lies deeper than the distinction between subjective and ontological accounts of time. What is at stake is the very structure of temporal succession and the possibility of reducing its different dimensions to a unified order. As Levinas observes, "Time, or time as understood in the Western philosophical tradition, is a movement from an absolute beginning toward a possible end. Hence the religious conception of the Last Judgment and the philosophical conception of eternity. Within such a temporal structure, the past, present, and future ultimately coexist 'simultaneously'; their difference is therefore only relative" [5].

What this conception presupposes is that the past, present, and future, despite their apparent difference, remain comprehensible within a single temporal horizon. Their difference is therefore ultimately relative rather than absolute. Time retains a tendency toward synchronization and totalization: what has passed, what is present, and what is yet to come can all be gathered within a comprehensive temporal order.

2.4. From the ethical limit of temporality to the possibility of ethical temporality

Levinas's phenomenological project begins precisely from this difficulty. The question is not simply whether phenomenology can incorporate ethics into its existing account of time, but whether the priority of ethics requires a transformation of temporality itself. If the Other is absolutely irreducible to the Same, and if responsibility precedes autonomous choice, then the temporal structure within which responsibility occurs cannot be derived solely from consciousness or from the self-understanding of Being.

This leads to a fundamental reformulation of the problem: can a temporality organized around subjective constitution or ontological self-disclosure provide an adequate ground for an absolute and asymmetrical responsibility for the Other? Levinas's answer is negative. Such a temporality cannot adequately account for the Other because the Other either becomes an intentional correlate of consciousness or remains a participant within the ontological structure of Being-with. More fundamentally, it cannot explain the origin of a responsibility that precedes freedom and rational deliberation.

The consequence is not a rejection of phenomenological temporality as such, but a demand to rethink its point of origin. If ethics is genuinely primordial, then temporality itself must be released from its exclusive orientation toward the subject and Being. The origin of time must instead be sought in the encounter through which the Other addresses the self and places it under an obligation that it has not chosen.

Levinas therefore relocates the origin of temporality from ontology to ethics. The face-to-face encounter is not an ethical event that occurs within an already constituted temporal framework; it is the event through which another form of temporality becomes possible. The Other interrupts the continuity of subjective time and introduces a dimension that cannot be recollected, represented, or synthesized by consciousness. Temporality thus acquires an ethical structure precisely insofar as it is opened by an alterity that exceeds every attempt at appropriation.

The transition from traditional phenomenological temporality to Levinasian ethical temporality is consequently not a movement from one theory of time to another in the narrow sense. It is a transformation of the question of what makes time possible. Once the Other is understood as the source of an irreducible temporal interruption, responsibility can no longer be regarded as a secondary ethical content added to an

already constituted subject. Rather, responsibility becomes inseparable from the temporal constitution of subjectivity itself.

This conclusion establishes the point of departure for the following discussion. If traditional phenomenology reveals the constitutive significance of temporality but remains unable to grant the Other an originary position within it, the next question is how Levinas constructs a temporal structure capable of sustaining ethical priority. The analysis must therefore move from the structural limit of phenomenological temporality to the genesis of ethical temporality itself.

3. The genesis of ethical temporality: from the advent of the Other to the rupture of time

Levinas's conception of ethical temporality does not begin with an abstract redefinition of time itself. Rather, it originates from a more fundamental transformation in the understanding of the relation between the self and the Other. In his view, the failure of traditional philosophy to adequately account for ethical responsibility is rooted in a deeper structural presupposition: alterity has consistently been interpreted within the horizon of the Same. Whether through conceptual representation, intentional constitution, or ontological comprehension, the Other is ultimately approached through structures governed by subjective intelligibility.

Against this tendency, Levinas insists upon the absolute alterity of the Other. The Other is not an object available to cognition, nor a being whose meaning can be exhausted through ontological analysis. Rather, the Other appears as an irreducible exteriority that exceeds every attempt at assimilation. It is precisely this encounter with alterity that provides the origin of ethical temporality. The arrival of the Other interrupts the continuity of subjective time and introduces a temporal dimension that cannot be derived from consciousness or Being.

This interruption raises the fundamental question concerning the possibility of ethical temporality: how can the encounter with the Other transform the very structure of time? In what sense does the Other not merely appear within time, but constitute a new mode of temporality? Levinas's response is that genuine time does not originate from the self's internal experience or from the unfolding of Being, but from the ethical relation through which the self is summoned to responsibility.

3.1. The absolute alterity of the Other and the origin of ethical temporality

The concept of the Other occupies a foundational position in Levinas's philosophy because it challenges the traditional assumption that meaning originates from the subject's capacity for identification. In most philosophical accounts, whatever appears before consciousness—including another person—is gradually incorporated into an intelligible order through concepts, representations, or intentional acts. Levinas argues that such a movement inevitably transforms alterity into a modification of the Same.

The Other, however, cannot be reduced to a correlate of consciousness. Its alterity is not a relative difference between comparable entities but an absolute heterogeneity that precedes every conceptual distinction. The Other remains exterior to the subject precisely because it cannot be completely possessed through knowledge. This irreducibility does not indicate a temporary limitation of cognition but reveals a fundamental asymmetry between self and Other.

For Levinas, this asymmetrical encounter is simultaneously ethical and temporal. The Other does not simply introduce a new content into an already constituted temporal sequence; rather, it interrupts the very continuity through which the subject experiences time. The advent of the Other, in its absolute strangeness and

transcendence, interrupts the self-enclosure of interiority and the self-sufficiency of "enjoyment". The subject can no longer remain enclosed within the satisfaction of its own needs or return entirely to itself [6].

The encounter with the Other thus introduces an interruption into the continuity of subjective existence, opening the self to a relation that cannot be reduced to intentional comprehension or ontological appropriation. It is precisely through this interruption that responsibility becomes possible. The origin of temporality is therefore displaced from the activity of consciousness to an event that exceeds consciousness's control.

This structure becomes explicit in Levinas's analysis of the face (*le visage*). The face is not a visible object or empirical appearance but the ethical manifestation of the Other. It does not provide information that consciousness subsequently interprets; instead, it addresses the self through an unconditional demand. Before the subject understands or chooses, it has already been called to respond.

Consequently, the encounter with the face does not occur within an independent temporal framework. It inaugurates a new temporal order. We do not first find ourselves within time and then encounter the Other; rather, it is the advent of the Other that opens the possibility of an authentic temporal flow [7]. The subject does not first possess time and then encounter responsibility; rather, responsibility emerges through the interruption of temporal continuity produced by the Other. Time, therefore, becomes intelligible only through the ethical relation itself.

This marks the decisive reversal introduced by Levinas. Ethical relation is not located within an already existing temporality; instead, temporality itself is generated through the relation with the Other. Ethical time is thus not a modification of ordinary chronological time but the structure through which responsibility becomes possible.

3.2. From the future to the immemorial past: the ethical reorientation of time

Once Levinas relocates the origin of temporality in the ethical encounter, he must reconsider the internal structure of time itself. Although he retains the traditional distinction between past, present, and future, these dimensions no longer possess their conventional meanings. Time is no longer understood as a continuous process unified by the subject but as a structure marked by interruption and transcendence.

The philosophical tradition has generally conceived time according to the logic of continuity. Whether expressed through theological narratives of salvation or philosophical accounts of historical development, past, present, and future are integrated into a unified horizon of meaning. Such a conception presupposes that temporal differences can ultimately be gathered into a coherent totality.

Levinas challenges this assumption because ethical responsibility requires a relation that cannot be absorbed into totality. The Other cannot emerge from a temporal order governed by continuity and anticipation. Therefore, ethical temporality must be understood through a different structure.

In his early reflections, Levinas initially emphasizes the future as the privileged dimension of transcendence. His reinterpretation of death already demonstrates this departure from Heidegger. Death is not simply Dasein's ownmost possibility but the "impossibility of every possibility", revealing an event that escapes subjective mastery. Through death, Levinas identifies a relation to a future that cannot be reduced to the projection of the self.

Nevertheless, the future-oriented structure remains insufficient because it still risks preserving the subject as the center from which transcendence is understood. The future remains the horizon toward which the subject relates itself. In his mature philosophy, Levinas therefore shifts the emphasis from the future to the immemorial past (*l'immemorial*).

The immemorial past does not refer to an event that has been forgotten but could theoretically be recovered. It designates a past that has never been present and therefore cannot become an object of memory.

Unlike empirical memory, which retrieves past experiences and integrates them into the continuity of personal identity, the immemorial escapes every operation of recollection and representation.

This temporal structure has decisive ethical implications. Responsibility for the Other cannot originate from a voluntary decision made by a free subject. Before the subject chooses or acts, it already finds itself responsible. Responsibility therefore comes from an anteriority that precedes consciousness itself.

The immemorial past expresses precisely this condition. The subject is indebted to the Other without having entered into any prior agreement or committed any identifiable act. This debt does not arise from historical chronology but from an anterior relation that cannot be traced back to an origin accessible to consciousness. Responsibility is therefore unconditional because its source precedes the subject's freedom.

Through the concept of the immemorial past, Levinas fundamentally transforms phenomenological temporality. Time no longer represents the self-development of consciousness or the projection of existence toward possibilities. Instead, it reveals an ethical anteriority that exceeds every attempt at appropriation.

3.3. The temporal structure of responsibility

The concept of ethical temporality reaches its systematic expression in Levinas's account of responsibility. By grounding responsibility in the immemorial past, Levinas rejects the traditional understanding of time as a homogeneous continuum available to consciousness. Time becomes structured by the asymmetrical relation between self and Other.

Accordingly, past, present, and future no longer function as successive moments within chronological succession. They represent three temporal dimensions through which responsibility unfolds.

The immemorial past establishes the origin of responsibility. Because this past has never been present, responsibility cannot be explained through memory, contract, or deliberate choice. The subject discovers itself as already responsible before it can constitute itself as an autonomous agent. Ethical obligation therefore precedes freedom.

The present also undergoes a radical transformation. It is no longer the privileged moment of self-presence in which consciousness constitutes meaning. Rather, it becomes the moment of exposure to the Other. The face interrupts the closure of the present and transforms it into the event of response. The subject exists in the present precisely because it is addressed by another.

The future, finally, no longer refers to the realization of the subject's own possibilities. It belongs to the Other and remains radically open because responsibility can never be completely fulfilled. The future expresses the inexhaustibility of ethical obligation rather than the completion of subjective projects.

These three dimensions together constitute the temporal structure of responsibility: the subject responds in the present to an obligation originating from an immemorial past and directed toward an unforeseeable future. Time is therefore not merely the context in which ethics occurs; it is the very structure through which responsibility becomes possible.

In this sense, ethical temporality represents a fundamental break with both phenomenological and ontological accounts of time. The past is irrecoverable because it precedes consciousness, the present is interrupted because it is opened by the Other, and the future remains unfinished because responsibility cannot reach completion. The discontinuity of time is not a deficiency but the very expression of alterity.

Ethical temporality therefore constitutes the deeper condition of Levinas's ethical philosophy. It explains why responsibility cannot be derived from ontology or autonomous subjectivity, but must be understood as arising from a temporal structure in which the Other always precedes the self.

4. The philosophical consequences of ethical temporality: reconstructing subjectivity and the priority of ethics

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that Levinas's conception of ethical temporality marks a decisive departure from dominant phenomenological interpretations of time. Temporality is no longer understood merely as the formal structure through which consciousness constitutes experience or as the horizon within which Being becomes intelligible. Instead, time originates in the ethical relation itself, emerging through the encounter with the Other and the responsibility awakened by this encounter. Ethical temporality, therefore, does not merely modify the phenomenological understanding of time; it transforms the conceptual foundations through which subjectivity, freedom, and ontology have traditionally been understood.

This transformation has consequences that extend beyond the philosophy of time. If temporality is constituted through the relation with the Other, then the subject can no longer be understood as an autonomous center that first establishes itself and subsequently enters into ethical relations. Responsibility must instead be understood as preceding the subject's self-constitution. The ethical transformation of temporality thus entails a corresponding transformation of subjectivity and, ultimately, of the relationship between ethics and ontology.

4.1. From ontological temporality to ethical temporality: reorienting the question of time

The transformation introduced by Levinas becomes clearer when situated within the broader history of Western philosophy. Since ancient metaphysics, temporality has been closely connected with the question of Being. Time has generally functioned as the horizon through which beings become accessible to thought, and philosophical inquiry has consequently been oriented toward revealing the conditions under which beings can be known. Within this framework, cognition operates through identification: what is encountered as other is gradually brought into the order of the Same through conceptual determination. To know something therefore means not only to understand it but also to incorporate it into a structure of intelligibility governed by the subject. The logic of presence consequently becomes an implicit foundation of philosophical reflection.

Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, despite its radical transformation of philosophical method, remains situated within this general orientation. Through the analysis of intentionality, Husserl demonstrates that consciousness is always consciousness of something, and that objects acquire meaning within the correlation between intentional acts and their objects. His investigations of internal time-consciousness further reveal that temporal experience cannot be reduced to a simple succession of isolated moments. Through retention, primal impression, and protention, consciousness constitutes the unity and continuity of lived time. Nevertheless, the living present retains a privileged position within this structure, functioning as the center from which temporal experience is synthesized and unified. Time thus remains inseparable from the activity of consciousness.

Heidegger's existential analytic represents a more radical attempt to overcome this subject-centered understanding of time. By interpreting temporality through the ecstatic unity of future, having-been, and present, Heidegger no longer regards time as a subjective flow of consciousness but as the fundamental structure of Dasein's existence. Yet, despite this transformation, temporality remains inseparable from the disclosure of Being. Time provides the horizon within which Being becomes manifest, and existence ultimately remains oriented toward the possibilities opened by its own temporal structure.

It is precisely against this philosophical inheritance that Levinas's ethical temporality emerges. His central question is no longer merely the meaning of Being, but the legitimacy of Being itself. In "Ethics as First Philosophy" (*Éthique comme philosophie première*), Levinas argues that: The question of the meaning of Being is therefore not a matter of an ontology that seeks to comprehend this extraordinary verb, "to be", but of

an ethics concerned with the justice of Being [8]. The question of Being is displaced by the question of its justice, the relation with the Other can no longer be understood as a secondary event occurring within an already constituted ontological order. The Other must instead be understood as that which interrupts the self-sufficiency of the subject and opens a relation irreducible to ontological comprehension. This question cannot be answered by ontology alone, because it already presupposes a relation more fundamental than ontological comprehension. Ethics, therefore, does not supplement ontology by adding a moral dimension to an already established order of Being. Rather, it reveals an ethical relation that precedes and makes possible ontological understanding.

The significance of this shift lies in the relocation of the origin of temporality. Time can no longer be regarded simply as a neutral framework within which ethical relations subsequently occur. Rather, the encounter with the Other introduces a temporal interruption through which responsibility becomes possible. The ethical transformation of temporality consequently prepares the way for a more fundamental transformation of subjectivity itself.

4.2. From self-identity to ethical subjectivity: the temporal reconstitution of the subject

This shift requires a transformation of the very structure of subjectivity. Levinas argues that beneath intentional activity and reflective consciousness lies a more originary dimension of passivity. The subject does not first constitute itself as an autonomous center and subsequently enter into ethical relations; rather, it finds itself already exposed to an obligation that precedes every act of consciousness and every exercise of freedom. Ethical temporality expresses precisely this anterior structure. Time is not something possessed by the subject but something that happens to the subject.

Levinas illustrates this temporal passivity through the phenomenon of aging. Aging is not an action performed by the subject but an irreversible process undergone by it. The subject cannot suspend, reverse, or appropriate aging through reflection. Time thus reveals itself as something that exceeds possession and mastery. The past does not simply remain available as an object of recollection; it withdraws irreversibly beyond the subject's capacity to recover it. Through this experience, Levinas identifies a dimension of time that cannot be integrated into the continuity of consciousness: the immemorial past.

The immemorial past differs fundamentally from the empirical past preserved through memory. The empirical past belongs to the order of presence because it can be recalled, represented, and incorporated into the subject's narrative identity. The immemorial past, however, has never been present. It precedes every act of consciousness and therefore cannot be retrieved through recollection. It indicates an absolute anteriority that escapes the subject's power of synthesis. Through this structure, ethical temporality breaks with the traditional understanding of time as a continuous movement organized around the present.

The significance of the immemorial past is not limited to the philosophy of time; it directly transforms the understanding of subjectivity. Since responsibility originates from a past that cannot be remembered or appropriated, the subject cannot identify an original moment in which it freely decided to become responsible. Responsibility therefore precedes self-awareness. The subject does not first exist and then assume responsibility; rather, it discovers itself as already responsible. Time itself reveals that ethical obligation precedes the autonomy traditionally attributed to the subject.

This reconstruction reaches its most radical expression in Levinas's distinction between the self-identical subject and the ethical subject. The modern philosophical tradition generally understands the subject as the source of meaning, the foundation of knowledge, and the center of autonomous action. Whether in rationalism, transcendental philosophy, or phenomenology, subjectivity is primarily defined through activity: the subject constitutes, interprets, and determines. Responsibility appears only after freedom has been established.

Levinas reverses this order. Responsibility precedes freedom, and freedom becomes meaningful only within a responsibility that has always already claimed the subject. The ethical subject is therefore not constituted through self-possession but through exposure. It emerges from the interruption caused by the Other. The "I" does not first exist as a sovereign identity and then encounter the Other; rather, it becomes a subject precisely because it has been addressed by the Other.

Thus, the ethical reconfiguration of temporality produces a corresponding reconfiguration of subjectivity. The subject is no longer defined primarily through continuity, self-presence, and autonomous activity, but through passivity, exposure, and responsibility. The temporal structure of ethical subjectivity therefore points beyond the question of self-identity toward the more radical question of how responsibility becomes constitutive of the self. This question leads directly to Levinas's concepts of substitution and hostage.

4.3. From responsibility to substitution: the temporal structure of ethical subjectivity

This logic is further developed through Levinas's concepts of substitution and hostage. These concepts should not be understood as voluntary acts of sacrifice but as expressions of the primordial structure through which ethical subjectivity is constituted. To be a hostage means that the subject finds itself responsible before it has chosen responsibility. The Other's vulnerability and suffering are not external demands added to an already complete self; they reveal that the self has never been fully enclosed within itself.

Substitution therefore indicates a radical displacement of subjectivity. The self does not become ethical by freely deciding to take another's place; rather, it discovers that its identity has always already been structured by responsibility for the Other. Because the origin of responsibility lies in the immemorial past, responsibility cannot be fully discharged or completed. Every response remains insufficient because the Other always exceeds the subject's ability to respond completely. This is why Levinas describes responsibility as infinite.

This response is not an active declaration but a passive exposure. The self's isolated temporality is disrupted by the unforeseeable advent of the Other, and the subject is thereby exposed to an obligation that precedes its freedom and consciousness [9].

The immemorial past establishes the temporal anteriority of responsibility, but responsibility acquires its most radical ethical form in substitution. Substitution begins with the passivity of the "I" in being summoned by the Other, in the very bond that binds it. From this passivity, the "I" comes to act, thereby unfolding the entire ethical horizon of assuming unconditional responsibility for the Other [10]. Passivity here does not signify the absence of action; rather, it names the condition from which ethical action becomes possible. The subject does not first choose responsibility and then act upon it. Rather, its action emerges from an obligation that has already claimed it before consciousness and freedom.

Infinity here does not refer to endless quantitative extension but to the impossibility of bringing ethical responsibility to closure. Responsibility remains open because its origin cannot be recovered and its demand cannot be exhausted. Every response to the Other necessarily leaves responsibility open to further response. Ethical temporality therefore differs fundamentally from ontological temporality. Ontological time seeks continuity, coherence, and the disclosure of Being; ethical time is structured by interruption, exposure, and the continual renewal of responsibility.

The temporal structure of responsibility can thus be understood through a fundamental asymmetry. The past precedes the subject without becoming an object of recollection; the present is interrupted by the Other's demand; and the future remains open because responsibility cannot be finally completed. These dimensions do not constitute a unified temporal totality centered on the present. Instead, they express a temporality in which the subject is continually displaced from self-possession toward responsibility.

Substitution therefore represents not an additional ethical doctrine but the deepest consequence of the temporal structure established by Levinas. If responsibility originates in an immemorial past and remains irreducible to completion, then the subject cannot be adequately described as an autonomous agent who occasionally assumes ethical obligations. It is instead a subject whose very identity is constituted through responsibility for the Other. Ethical temporality consequently provides the temporal basis for Levinas's radical reconstruction of subjectivity.

4.4. From ethical temporality to first philosophy: the establishment of ethical priority

The final consequence of ethical temporality concerns Levinas's claim that ethics is first philosophy. This claim should not be understood simply as a preference for ethical questions over ontological ones. Rather, it expresses a structural thesis: ethics is primary because responsibility constitutes the condition under which ontology itself becomes possible. Before the subject understands itself as an existing being, it is already answerable to the Other.

Ethical temporality provides the temporal articulation of this priority. The immemorial past reveals that responsibility precedes consciousness; the interruption of the present demonstrates that ethical exposure disrupts the subject's claim to self-sufficiency; and the future of the Other prevents responsibility from reaching completion. Through these temporal dimensions, Levinas redefines the meaning of time itself. Time is no longer merely the horizon within which Being appears; it becomes the structure through which responsibility and transcendence emerge.

This transformation also clarifies why ethics cannot simply be added to ontology as a secondary philosophical domain. If responsibility precedes the subject's freedom and self-consciousness, then ontology already presupposes an ethical relation. The subject who encounters Being is not an entirely self-sufficient subject; it is already a subject addressed by the Other. Ethics, therefore, does not follow ontology chronologically or conceptually. It precedes ontology at the level of the very structure through which subjectivity and meaning become possible.

Consequently, Levinas's ethical temporality does not merely introduce an ethical dimension into phenomenological time analysis. It reconstructs the very relation between time, subjectivity, and Being. The subject is no longer the origin from which meaning proceeds but a being constituted through vulnerability and responsibility. Time is no longer defined by self-presence but by the trace of alterity that exceeds every attempt at appropriation. It is precisely because time bears the mark of the Other that ethics can precede ontology.

The significance of this reorientation therefore extends beyond Levinas's philosophy of time. It provides a systematic connection between his accounts of subjectivity, alterity, responsibility, substitution, and transcendence. Ethical temporality explains how the subject can be constituted without reducing it to self-identity, how responsibility can precede freedom, and how transcendence can remain irreducible to presence. It thus functions as an underlying structure that unifies otherwise distinct dimensions of Levinas's philosophical project.

In this sense, ethical temporality constitutes one of the central philosophical foundations of Levinas's thought. It explains how the transition from ontology to ethics becomes possible and why responsibility must be understood as more originary than freedom or self-consciousness. Levinas's ethical turn is therefore not simply a change in philosophical emphasis; it is a transformation of the temporal structure through which subjectivity itself becomes intelligible. Ethical priority is possible precisely because temporality itself is no longer governed exclusively by the subject's relation to itself, but is opened by the irreducible claim of the Other.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined Levinas's ethical philosophy from the perspective of temporality in order to clarify the philosophical foundation of his claim that ethics precedes ontology. It has been argued that dominant phenomenological accounts of time, whether grounded in transcendental consciousness or in the disclosure of Being, remain insufficient to explain the ethical relation because they retain a temporal structure centered on subjectivity. When time is understood primarily as the horizon within which consciousness constitutes meaning or Dasein discloses its existence, the Other can only appear within an already established order of intelligibility. Therefore, the question of ethical responsibility requires not simply a new ethical theory but a fundamental transformation of the understanding of temporality itself.

Levinas's response lies in relocating the origin of time from the interiority of the subject to the encounter with the Other. Time is no longer a neutral framework within which ethical relations take place; rather, it is constituted through the interruption and transcendence introduced by alterity. Ethical responsibility does not emerge from autonomous choice or rational deliberation but from a more originary temporal structure that precedes consciousness, freedom, and intentionality. Through this reversal, ethics becomes not a secondary dimension of philosophy but the condition under which subjectivity itself becomes possible.

From this perspective, ethical temporality provides a key to understanding the systematic unity of Levinas's philosophy. Once temporality is ethically reconfigured, subjectivity can no longer be grounded in self-identity or self-presence. Instead, the subject is constituted through exposure, vulnerability, and responsibility for the Other. Likewise, alterity is not merely an empirical difference or a limit of knowledge; it is preserved by a temporal structure that resists recollection, synthesis, and conceptual appropriation. Ethical temporality therefore functions as the underlying structure connecting Levinas's reflections on subjectivity, responsibility, transcendence, and the Other.

The significance of this temporal transformation extends beyond Levinas's own philosophy. It challenges the phenomenological assumption that time is primarily the condition of meaning constitution or the disclosure of Being, revealing instead an ethical dimension of temporality through which transcendence enters experience without being reduced to presence. In this sense, Levinas's reconstruction of time reshapes the relation between ethics and ontology and opens a phenomenological horizon in which responsibility, rather than Being, becomes the fundamental orientation of philosophical reflection.

Ultimately, the significance of ethical temporality lies not simply in proposing an alternative account of time, but in demonstrating why ethics is prior to ontology at the very level of the structures through which subjectivity, responsibility, and meaning emerge. By revealing that time itself bears the trace of alterity, Levinas establishes temporality as the fundamental condition for the possibility of ethical responsibility.

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