



THESIS - Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring 2021

International Research Journal

 Kolegji AAB  
CILESI. LIDERSHIP. SUKSESI

ISSN: 1848-4298 (Print) ISSN: 2623-8381(Online)

# *“Il faut défendre la subjectivité”: Vulnerability in Levinas’s Ethics*

*Guelfo Carbone*

## **How to cite this article:**

Carbone, G. (2021). “Il faut défendre la subjectivité”: Vulnerability in Levinas’s Ethics. *Thesis*, 10 (1), 135 – 159.



Published online: June 30, 2021



Article received March 28, 2021.  
Article accepted May 10, 2021.



Conflict of Interest: Author declares no conflict of interest.

## *“Il faut défendre la subjectivité” : Vulnerability in Levinas’s Ethics*

*Guelfo Carbone<sup>1</sup>, Ph.D.*

*E-mail address: guelfo.carbone@uniroma3.it*

*Orcid: 0000-0002-7696-6851*

### **Abstract**

Levinas conceived ethics as a contestation of the ontological imperialism and its asphyxiating order dominating Western culture, arguing that, rather than ontology, ethics is first philosophy. Supported and led by a phenomenological description of the concrete life of the embodied subject, his philosophical work achieves a radical critique of the sovereign subject by emphasizing the exceptional ethical significance of subjectivity. This paper discusses three key features that, according to Levinas, define human subjectivity, namely, vulnerability, passivity, and weakness, stressing how he thinks of subjectivity in terms of both welcoming and persecution at one and the same time. Lastly, by relying on Butler’s critique of the Levinasian ethics, the paper addresses Levinas’s take on politics, pointing out why political issues enter his ethical discourse.

**Keywords:** Emmanuel Levinas; ethics; vulnerability; politics; Judith Butler

---

<sup>1</sup> Adjunct Professor of Philosophy of Religions, Department of Philosophy, Communication Studies, and Performing Arts, University of Roma Tre (Rome, Italy).

## **Introduction: Subjectivity must be defended.**

*Il faut défendre la subjectivité* ("it is necessary to defend subjectivity"): this was the answer given by Levinas, at the *Société française de Philosophie* in Paris in 1962, during the discussion that followed the presentation entitled *Transcendence and Height*, in order to explain his criticism against the oppression of the subject by the State, against "the element of violence in the State, in the hierarchy" (Levinas, 1996, p. 23). This formulation calls to mind the renowned title of Foucault's lecture course "*Il faut défendre la société*" ("Society must be defended") that took place fourteen years later, in 1976, just around the corner, at the *Collège de France*. At that time, Foucault was concerned with the genealogy of power and knowledge, and he delved into the analysis of the effects of domination and subjugation in concrete manifestations of power. Beneath the "great absolute power [...] of sovereignty," he glimpsed the emergence of what he calls the "power of regularization," which relies on the "technology of biopower" that is politically exerted over and scientifically experimented on human beings "insofar as they are living beings" (Foucault, 2003, p. 247).

Although from different perspectives, and following different methodological paths, as Visker (1999, pp. 115-143) has noted, this same concern towards the concrete life of individuals and the power embedded in everyone's life can be identified in Levinas's statement above. In what follows, this paper discusses three key features that, according to Levinas, define human subjectivity: vulnerability, passivity, and weakness (section 2); how Levinas thinks of subjectivity in terms of both welcoming and persecution at one and the same time (section 3); Levinas's path towards politics, that is to say, why political questions enter his ethical discourse (section 4); Butler's analysis on vulnerability, which extends the reasoning

to the biopolitical challenges for a global ethics. In so Doing, the precontractual dimension is attained, suggesting the possible scope for a phenomenologically oriented radical political enquiry (section 5).

## **A power made of impotencies: Vulnerability and Responsibility.**

Extreme vulnerability, radical passivity, and originary weakness: these are the key features defining human subjectivity as it is described in Levinas’s ethics via a particular phenomenological method (Levinas, 2011, p. 183; 1979, pp. 28–29). All these phenomenological findings concur in presenting the ethical significance arising directly from the core of the “constituted, willful, imperialist subject” (Levinas, 2011, p. 112), of modern man, who is “merely concerned to maintain the powers of his sovereignty” (Levinas, 1989, p. 78).

Levinas’s “ethical metaphysics” (Bergo, 1999, p. 37) aims at the unDoing “of the substantial nucleus of the ego” (Levinas, 2011, p. 141), so that the “extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others” (Levinas, 2011, p. 10) begins to make sense thanks to an alternative, phenomenological consideration of ontological subjectification itself (Calin, 2008; Bernasconi, 2018).

Vulnerability characterises subjectivity “qua signification, qua one-for-another,” which can be traced back to the “vulnerability of the ego, to the incommunicable, non-conceptualizable, sensibility” (Levinas, 2011, p. 14). Accordingly, one of the key questions of moral philosophy – i.e. what is the origin of responsibility? – is tackled by Levinas when he describes the very subjectivity of human beings as “extreme vulnerability,” a condition that signals an

irrecoverable “divergency between the ego and the self” (Levinas, 1987, p. 149).

Bernasconi (2018, pp. 261–263) remarks that this duality, of the me and the self, had already been glimpsed by Levinas in his early works during the 1930s, such as 1934 *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism* (Levinas, 1990b), 1935 *On Escape* (Levinas, 2003a), and 1947 *Existence and Existents* (Levinas, 1978). After noting that Levinas reconducts both suffering and enjoyment to the duality of the me and the self, Bernasconi further explains that the subject is exposed to wounding in enjoyment (he quotes Levinas, 2011, p. 64), and that this wounding is understood as vulnerability, “following its etymology back to the Latin *vulnerabilis*,” a term that becomes crucial by 1970, insofar as it refers to the openness to the other, which is said to take the form of vulnerability (Bernasconi 2018, pp. 268–269; Levinas, 2003b, p. 64). Thus, vulnerability turns out to be *one’s own* vulnerability, and, therefore, at the same time, vulnerability entails the experience of the sudden collapse of the autonomy of the subject construed as a self-sufficient, sovereign subject.

According to Levinas’s phenomenological reinterpretation of the “concreteness of egoism” (1979, p. 38), the me finds itself vulnerable even in the most elementary acts of existence, such as while at rest. This raises, and indeed has raised, an array of essential problems in Levinas’s account of ethics. To remain with the question of responsibility, for instance, it is worth noting that, during a conversation held in 1975 (just a year after *Otherwise than being* appeared), Levinas tackles the following question from the audience: “If I am vulnerable as you emphasize in your books, how can I be responsible? If one suffers, one can no longer do anything.” Levinas’s answer to this question gives him the opportunity to

clarify how he arrived at his critique of the sovereignty of the subject (1998a, p. 83):

By vulnerability, I am attempting to describe the subject as passivity. If there is not vulnerability, if the subject is not always in his patience on the verge of an already senseless pain, then he posits himself *for himself*. In this case, the moment at which he is substance is not far away; the moment at which he is pride, at which he is imperialist, at which he has the other like an object. The endeavor was to present my relationship with another not as an attribute of my substantiality, not as an attribute of my hardness as a person, but on the contrary as the fact of my destitution, of my deposition (in the sense in which one speaks of the deposition of a sovereign).

The phenomenological account of ethics finds in vulnerability the way to that "radical passivity" (Levinas, 2003b, p. 63), which discloses the pre-original involvement in the relationship with the Other. As Critchley rightly recalls, the ethical relation takes place at the level of sensibility, not at the level of consciousness, and the subject's "sentient vulnerability or passivity" (2002, p. 21) towards others takes place "on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves" (Levinas, 2011, p. 15). That is why the irreducible face-to-face relationship is described by Levinas as an asymmetrical, singularizing bond in which all the powers and rights of the alleged autonomous subject are irrevocably destroyed. The extreme vulnerability on the one hand, and the absolute passivity of the embodied subject on the other, define the dual system of moral obligation established between the me and the Other (Franck, 2008).

In order to provide concrete examples of the alterity of the Other, Levinas draws on biblical figures, such as the widow and the orphan, the stranger, and the poor man, whereas the me is "the rich or the powerful" (1989, p. 48). However, the power and richness of the self-sufficient subject, or

“hypostasis,” are traumatically and concretely undermined by the very presence of the Other, which imposes him/herself just because s/he is Other and “this alterity is incumbent on [the] me with a whole charge of indigence and weakness” (Levinas, 2011, pp. 17–18). If the hypostasis of the subject represents the ontological core suitable for the grounding of its autonomy, the incumbent weakness of the Other causes the “coring out” of enjoyment (Levinas, 2011, pp. 64 and 181), that is, of the very egoity or substantiality of the subject.

In Levinas’s account of ethics, a certain philosophical anthropology, based on egoism and enjoyment pursued via the *conatus* towards satisfaction, is maintained only to be radically criticised and also in order to emphasise the “disquietude” (Levinas, 1979, p. 149) experienced right in the midst of the ego’s life. As Peperzak has noted (1980, p. 93), the egoism-enjoyment synergy is the first step taken by the soul in pursuing the good, but this synergy expresses no mere attitude; rather, it is an ontological structure that constitutes the subject in its substantiality and separation.

The entire phenomenological effort expressed by Levinas in breaching the ontological self-centred interiority by describing the ethical meaning woven into the concrete life of the embodied subject, leads to a particular notion of “responsibility,” construed as “a power made of ‘impotencies’” (1986, p. 354). Impotency which is also a power: this means that the burden of responsibility does not prevent the subject from assuming all its duties; rather, it discloses an exponentially increasing obligation. Indeed, responsibility is “infinite,” because it increases “*in the measure it is assumed*” and “duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished” (1979, p. 244). Responsibility from vulnerability is “absolute” (Levinas, 1998a, p. 84) because it pushes the me to the point of a

"substitution" that goes one way only (Levinas, 1998a, p. 84; 2011, p. 119).

Along with this "hyperbolic notion of responsibility" (Bernasconi, 2002, p. 236), the weakness of the Other infects, so to speak, the sovereign subject in what is its most crucial and fundamental feature, that feature that defines the sense of the word 'power' when ascribed to a human being, namely, the liberty of acting in self-determination as an autonomous individual. Thus, Levinas's fundamental thesis on the primacy of ethics over ontology implies that the ethical subject is a weak subject, and, as Jacques Derrida has noted, the thought of substitution goes back to "a force that is nonetheless made vulnerable by a certain weakness," and leads towards "a logic that is hardly thinkable, almost unsayable" (Derrida, 1999, p. 70).

### **Host and Hostage.**

In the asymmetrical relationship with the Other, proximity turns out to be a traumatic exposure to alterity that incessantly upsets subjectification. The very notion of 'subject' takes on a crucial, different meaning, which Levinas emphasises by drawing on the Latin etymology of the noun: "[t]he self is a *subjectum*; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything" (2011, p. 116). Face-to-face with the Other, the subject finds itself responsible before it has any comprehension of what freedom can be, and before any agency. The significance of the responsibility faced by the subject is prior to both conscious acceptance and linguistic mutual exchange or agreement. The very identity of the subject "comes from the impossibility of escaping responsibility, from the taking charge of the other," so that it is no longer possible to discuss ethical issues anonymously, since "[t]he subject which is not an ego,

but which I am, cannot be generalized, is not a subject in general” (Levinas, 2011, pp. 13–14).

Subjectification is as radical as the emblematic case that Levinas takes from the Bible, namely, the cheek offered to the smiter. This example substantiates his basic thesis according to which the subject is called into question in the relationship with the Other:

The subjectivity as *the other in the same*, as an inspiration, is the putting into question of all affirmation for-oneself, all egoism born again in this very recurrence. (This putting into question is not a preventing!) The subjectivity of a subject is responsibility of being-in-question in the form of the total exposure to offence in the cheek offered to the smiter. This responsibility is prior to dialogue, to the exchange of questions and answers, to the thematization of the said, which is superposed on my being put into question by the other in proximity, and in the saying proper to responsibility is produced as a digression (Levinas, 2011, pp. 111–112).

Again, just like in the case of other key words from Levinas’s account of ethics, such as vulnerability (from *vulnerabilis*) and subject (from *sub-jectum*), one might trace his powerful argumentation on the being-in-question of the subject back to the Latin etymology, since, as Benveniste (2016, p. 435) puts it in his *Dictionary of Indo-European concepts and society*, the Latin noun “*quaestio*” means “(judicial) investigation” and also “‘torture’ (whence *quaestio* ‘investigate by means of torture, to torture’).”

Moreover, the philosophical language at use here, in describing responsibility as ‘being-in-question,’ clearly addresses, and also attacks, Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, which Janicaud has interpreted as “ontological fundamentalism” (1996, pp. 227–228), particularly its outrageous political consequences, as it has been recently taken

up again in the wake of the publication of the *Schwarze Hefte*, Black Notebooks (Farin and Malpas, 2016). In fact, the possibility of the ontological investigations presented in *Being and Time* in 1927 lies in the opportunity to philosophically retrieve “the questionableness of Being,” which was fatally evoked during the formal address that Heidegger delivered when he became rector of the University of Freiburg i.B. in May 1933, during the Nazi regime (M. Heidegger, Harries, H. Heidegger, 1985, p. 477; Richardson, 2003).

This being-in-question that the subject undergoes in the inescapable responsibility towards the Other (Levinas, 2011, pp. 13–14) is ambivalent. Indeed, on the one hand, “the subject is a host,” insofar as the conscious life of the subject is attention and “hospitality,” that is, the “welcome of the face” (Levinas, 1979, p. 299). In the epiphany of the Other, the face and its cheek, before any intentional act of welcoming or refusal, signifies extreme vulnerability, as well as a calling forth for “unconditional hospitality” (Derrida, 1999, pp. 54 and 141).

On the other hand, the subject is a hostage, “obsessed by the neighbor” as much as it is “obsessed with responsibilities” (Levinas, 2011, pp. 123 and 112). The “uncondition” of being hostage, mentioned at the outset of *Otherwise Than Being* (Levinas, 2011, p. 6), condenses what Levinas means by “an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment” (2011, p. 101), just like the covenant that Israel makes with the Lord, in which obligation precedes the delivery of the basic laws of the covenant itself (*Exodus*, 19: 5), namely, the ten words, or Decalogue (*Exodus*, 34: 28).

Rather than a condition, the obsession of the hostage goes back to a situation, namely, an ethical situation, in which obedience precedes the hearing of the order (Levinas, 2011, p. 150), an obedience that is “prior to any voluntary decision which could have assumed it” (2011, p. 54). Therefore, the

ethical relationship between the me and the Other takes the shape of a very concrete situation, which calls to mind the one depicted in the parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10: 25–37*), where responsibility concerns “the first one on the scene” (Levinas, 2011, p. 11).

Obsession, which affects responsibility; persecution, to the point of substitution: it is clear that Levinas’s account of the ethical intrigue does not entail an optimistic take on human nature (Vogel 2008). In his words, responsibility for others does not mean “altruistic will, instinct of ‘natural benevolence,’ or love” (2011, pp. 111–112).

Yet, the subjectivity of the hostage is at once the subjectivity of the host. As Bernasconi points out (2018, p. 267), whereas in *Totality and Infinity*, the subject is construed as a host, in *Otherwise Than Being*, the subject is a hostage. However, to be a hostage can still be explained in terms of hospitality: in fact, the-one-for-the-other relationship is not a mere coming together of two subjects; rather, it is a traumatic situation by which the me undergoes an incessant alienation by the guest who is entrusted to it. The subject is not a hostage *despite* the fact that it is a host; rather, it is a hostage *because* it is a host, visited by the upsetting presence of the Other in the Same.

Alienation thus represents the other side of substitution, the key notion in Levinas’s ethics. Persecution can go to the point of substitution, in which the me replaces the Other in his/her duties and responsibilities, whereas no one can replace the me: “the substitution of the one for the other does not signify the substitution of the other for the one” (Levinas, 2011, p. 158). Levinas’s own idea of alienation, in turn, addresses the very identity of the subject, i.e. the “uniqueness” of a psyche: “alienation [...] does not empty the same of its identity, but constrains it to it, with an unimpeachable assignation,

constrains it to it as no one else, where no one could replace it” (2011, p. 141).

Starting from this ethical situation, which is characterised by obsession, persecution, and alienation, the following section tackles the role of the third party and the function of justice in Levinas’s account of ethics. The aim is to rephrase the objection from the audience that was mentioned in the previous section, by asking how a subject, who is not only vulnerable, but also alienated, who is a host and a hostage at the same time, can fulfill his/her duties by balancing vulnerability and responsibility, *conatus essendi* and original obligation to responsibility.

### **Equal among equals.**

In order to contextualise the argument of this section, it is important to note that according to Levinas, egoism and responsibility are neither moral choices nor symmetrically opposed notions; rather, they are ontological features of the same subjectivity, which, in the relationship with the Other, finds itself both host and hostage at one and the same time. This means that the opposite of the vulnerable subject is not the invincible subject. In fact, the vulnerability Levinas speaks of has no contrary notion. It is, literally speaking, an unparalleled situation that defines the me in proximity with the Other. Moreover, this situation is asymmetrical, with respect to responsibilities and duties, as has just been stressed at the end of the previous section.

Nevertheless, a counterweight to vulnerability is to be found in justice, and in the rectification that the latter entails. This issue takes the shape, and the function, of a touchstone for Levinas’s ethics, inasmuch as justice begins with the “third man” (Levinas, 2011, p. 150), whose presence demands the

rectification of the asymmetrical dual relationship that constitutes the ethical intrigue. This “third party” is the “source of justice” (Levinas, 1998a, p. 83), the judge; in other words, s/he speaks with authority, and such an authority upsets the dual system of obligation. In the face of the third party, the me finds itself invested with responsibility for all human beings, not only for its neighbor, so that the very notion of *proximity* acquires a new meaning. Indeed, by its presence, the third party rectifies the one-way obligation, and limits responsibility (Levinas, 2011, p. 157). It is important to stress that the Levinasian notion of justice is pre-institutional, namely, it does not trace back to the concept of justice as exercised by courts or sovereign States; rather, it is an essential element of part of the strategy of the primacy of ethics (2011, 159).

So, contiguity is extended proximity, in which the subject finds itself among other subjects, finds itself as an equal among equals. As Levinas acknowledges during the conversation mentioned in the second section above, the third party is represented in the Other from the very beginning of the relationship, that is to say, the relation with another is never uniquely the relation with the Other: “in the very appearance of the [O]ther the third already regards me.” And with the appearance of the third party, “proximity becomes problematic: one must compare, weigh, think; one must do justice, which is the source of theory” (Levinas, 1998a, p. 82).

The question of justice in Levinas’s account of ethics has garnered an array of problems, some of which were addressed by Derrida during the opening speech delivered at the conference that took place a year after Levinas’s death. Indeed, as Derrida puts it, “formidable problems arise with the third” (Derrida, 1999, p. 29). What we might be tempted to call the providential irruption of the third party in the dual relationship, can be summarised in two basic moves, which are

also the effects of the rectification brought about by the third party.

First, the third party "interrupts the face to face of a welcome of the other man, interrupts the proximity or approach of the neighbor" (Levinas, 2011, p. 150). In this sense, the third party brings about an "incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity" (Levinas, 2011, p. 158). Second, the third party mitigates the traumatic experience of alterity. Ricœur noted (2004, p. 91) that Levinas draws on "extreme terms", such as obsession, wound, and traumatism, in order to emphasise the description of the vulnerable subject, generating an 'escalation of the pathetic to pathetic and the pathological.'" However, the third appeases such an escalation, inasmuch as its presence affects both the obedience prior to intentionality and the obligation towards the first party on the scene. The model of the Good Samaritan, which helps in understanding the dual relationship, does not apply to proximity construed as a human plurality (Levinas, 1998b, 166-167).

Thus, the presence of the third party is structural to the very idea of plurality, of humanity, which represents the wide scope of Levinas's reflections (2011, p. 83). That is why Derrida pinpoints a "double bind" in Levinas's account of ethics, which moves in two simultaneous and complementary directions, both towards the Other and towards the third party. This perspective entails a crucial criticism. As Derrida puts it: "if the face to face with the unique engages the infinite ethics of my responsibility for the other in a sort of oath before the letter, an unconditional respect or fidelity, then the ineluctable emergence of the third, and, with it, of justice, would signal an initial perjury [*parjure*]," which is "as original as the experience of the face" (1999, p. 33).

Before any code of law or court of justice, even before any planned action or agreed protocol of interaction, the third party

is, so to speak, providentially there to protect the me from exposure to potentially unrestrained violence within the immediate relationship with the Other, which, as we have seen, is understood by Levinas in terms of persecution. As judge, neighbour of the neighbour, trigger of a plurality in proximity that awakens the subject right in the midst of the world, the very presence of the third party is, at once, sufficient to interrupt the drift of a limitless, unachievable obligation, and to disturb the “exteriority of two people” (Levinas, 1999, p. 142), as Tahmasebi-Birgani (2014) also notes.

Furthermore, the ‘formidable problems’ that arise with the third party are rooted in Levinas’s basic claim on the primacy of ethics over ontology, since the “quasi-transcendental or originary, indeed, pre-originary, perjury,” as Derrida remarks, might be considered “*ontological*, once ethics is joined to everything that exceeds and betrays it (ontology, precisely, synchrony, totality, the State, etc.)” (1999, p. 34).

It was utterly clear to Levinas that an account of ethics based solely on the dual relationship with the Other, in which, as he puts it, “I owe him everything” (1998a, p. 83), would undermine and reduce the very idea of responsibility. However, to extend the concept of proximity in order to welcome the plurality of subjects involved in the concrete, political relationship means also to delve into the dimension in which the account of ethics becomes truly philosophical, i.e., it points right to the heart of the issue. He expresses this concern best in *Otherwise Than Being* (2011, p. 157): “If proximity ordered to me only the other alone, there would have not been any problem, in even the most general sense of the term. [...] The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters.”

Thus, proximity must include contiguity. The latter concerns a plurality of equal subjects, and, therefore, it entails the obligation to compare unique and incomparable others, as outlined above. As Bergo argues (1999, pp. 83 and 129), besides the face-to-face, we must also consider the 'side by side' relationship. At this stage, ethics meets politics, that is, political problems arise right at the heart of Levinas's account of ethics. In this case, therefore, politics is to be understood as the concrete public and institutional space, just like the "space of appearance" that Arendt refers to with the Greek term "*polis*": "the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly" (1998, pp. 198–199).

Levinas was well aware of the entanglements of ethics and politics, and, in coherence with his main thesis on the primacy of ethics over ontology (1979), he defended the reasons he considers ethics to be not only before ontology, but also before politics, being firmly convinced that "[p]olitics must be able to be checked and criticized starting from the ethical" (1985, p. 80).

For instance, he was well aware that the "passivity of the hostage cannot exist in an organized society or a State" (Levinas, 2000, p. 23). We started by commenting on a statement by Levinas, delivered during the discussion of *Transcendence and Height*, in 1962: it is necessary to defend subjectivity. This statement was in response to Wahl (convener of the lecture), who asked: "You spoke of the State. I very much want us to criticize the State, but I also sense its utility. Without it, what would happen?" (Levinas, 1996, p. 23). Levinas's reply avoids both a sterile opposition to the State and an economic, calculative approach to the worth of the individual's life. Subjectivity must be defended before and beyond any reason of

State, before and beyond any cost-benefit calculation, but this does not necessarily mean *against* them (albeit hostilities between individuals and the State often spring from this latter). Levinas's take on ethics is not about this hostility; it leads elsewhere, by addressing the ethical relationship that makes itself known before (and notwithstanding) any societal institution. This does not mean that such an ethics does not need institutions; rather, it alludes to the fact that the need for institutions does not represent the reason that humans create societies, and, consequently, that this allegedly originary need should not be considered the alpha and omega of political thought.

Moreover, Levinas's approach remains phenomenological when he suggests that politics can greatly benefit from a modified grasp (Heidegger, 1996, 167) of the relations established within institutions, which are, first and foremost, relations among human beings. However, rather than delving into that "enigmatic relationship in Levinas's thought between an ethics and a politics of hospitality - or of the hostage" (Derrida, 1999, p. 63), the final section will continue to investigate the theme of vulnerability, by extending, in the wake of Levinas's reasoning, the scope of the inquiry on vulnerability to plural proximity and contiguity, namely, to sociality.

### **Towards a phenomenological approach to politics. Some provisional conclusive remarks.**

Vulnerability is a key concept of Levinas's ethics that also extends its signification into the plural, political setting opened up by the third party and by the birth of institutions of human coexistence. However, Levinas is quick to warn that ethics strives to reassert its primacy against the tide of "Western

tradition," in which plurality is construed as "the reciprocal and formal alterity of individuals composing a genus," individuals that are "equals among themselves through the community of the genus." In brief, "the plurality of humans" should be understood "against the logic of the genus" (Levinas, 1998c, pp. 190–193). This is Levinas's ethical take on politics. Ethics responds to a logic that takes each individual, in the exceptionality of her/his living meaning, out of the genus and puts her/him before her/his own an-archival uniqueness, which makes itself known in inescapable responsibility (2011, p. 101).

Judith Butler's criticisms, however, stem precisely from these same reasons. Indeed, she pinpoints "two dissonant dimensions" in his ethical philosophy, suggesting Levinas should be read "against himself" (Butler, 2015, p. 106). On the one hand, while emphasising the importance of the category of proximity, she extends the reach of the notion of vulnerability to societal order as a whole, comprehending collective subjects, such as entire populations and nations, along with individual subjects. On the other, she denounces Levinas's patent contradiction in affirming forms of nationalism, Israeli nationalism in particular, in the light of his premises on the exceptional significance of the human subject.

The crucial ontological point around which Butler's analysis revolves is that, in proximity, the neighbour has nothing in common with the me, and not even vulnerability and precarity can constitute any communal essence. The reasoning on vulnerability and precarity, in turn, represents the opportunity for critical thinking to understand the relationship with other humans. She follows Levinas when she argues that we are nonetheless bound up with a rigorous notion of responsibility to those we do not know, even to those "we did not choose, could never have chosen," and also stresses that

“these obligations are, strictly speaking, precontractual” (2015, p. 107), as also Bernasconi remarks (2018, p. 260).

Butler’s criticisms, in turn, rely on the possibility of extending the ethical relation “to those who cannot appear within the horizon of ethics, who are not persons or are not considered to be the kinds of beings with whom one can or must enter into an ethical relation,” with the aim of articulating a “global ethics” that is not grounded in or traced back to national belonging or communitarian affiliation (Butler, 2015, pp. 107–108).

This perspective is taken up in the conclusive chapter of the *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, where, Butler understands biopolitics as “those powers that organize life, even the powers that differentially dispose lives to precarity as part of a broader management of populations through governmental and nongovernmental means, and that establish a set of measures for the differential valuation of life itself.” She further points out that the organization of life under these forms of governance of humans as living beings entails that “the status of a subject who is worthy of rights and protections” is allocated in a “differential way” (2015, p. 196). Accordingly, her approach shifts the focus to the “ungrievable,” i.e. to those lives already considered not lives, “already dead and gone, prior to any explicit destruction or abandonment,” and opens ethical reasoning on this matter to the experience of the subjects whose lives are deemed “not worth safeguarding, protecting, and valuing” (2015, p. 197).

With the term “precarity,” as it is well known, Butler defines the condition of these vulnerable lives that become “unlivable” within the frame of a “daily experience of neoliberalism,” since they are exposed to State violence and social exclusion, or suffer forced emigration, or are exploited as an expendable and degraded workforce to different degrees all

over the world. Precarious lives are twice “damaged,” insofar as they suffer damage both in the present and the destruction of any future prospect (2015, pp. 201–202).

Besides vulnerability and precarity, Butler introduces another key notion, namely, dependency, often falsely reduced to an effect caused by the former two basic conditions of human social life. What she considers her “stronger point” is the importance of understanding dependency as a radical condition for human creatures that survive and persist only in their vital relation with “sustaining environment, social forms of relationality, and economic forms that presume and structure interdependency” (2015, pp. 209–210). In this sense, she proposes revisiting Arendt’s account of the private and public distinction in the classical Greek *polis*, according to which the “disavowal of dependency becomes the precondition of the autonomous thinking and acting political subject.” Thus, Butler argues in favour of “new body politics” that begin with “the critique of that unacknowledged dependency” in order to “account for the relation between precarity and performativity” (2015, pp. 206–207), assuming that an acknowledged dependency can also serve as the ground for seeking to lead a good life in a bad life.

It is not the case here to delve into Butler’s political perspective on the forms of plural and embodied resistance to a bad life, which aims at articulating “what it might mean to lead a good life in the sense of a livable life” (2015, pp. 217–218). The present section aimed to stress that Butler’s premises are the same as those arrived at by Levinas by approaching ethics from phenomenology, that is to say, an account of ethics based on non-sovereign, weak subjects defined by vulnerability and interdependency (Ferrarese, 2016 and 2017). Secondly, the precontractual dimension marked by vulnerability opens up the possibility of an alternative take on today’s world, by

urging reflections on the “conditions of sociality and political life that cannot be contractually stipulated, and whose denial and manipulability constitute an effort to destroy or manage an interdependent social condition of politics” (Butler, 2015, pp. 211–213). Through that precontractual dimension, global ethics – ethics conceived at the global level, both in space and time – regains the future dimension, that is, the dimension of which the damaged life is deprived. It is clear that there is much more than a mere commonality of premises between Butler and Levinas, since they both share an approach to politics that leads to the precontractual dimension. Furthermore, this path towards politics suggests that phenomenology can fruitfully contribute to political thought despite the outrageous political positions that some phenomenologists may assume.

As outlined above, Levinas’s account of ethics leads to a political dimension that precedes any social contract, and, not unlike in the case of Heidegger, Levinas’s path towards politics coherently pushes its phenomenological approach to its extreme possibilities, which puts any given institution “out of action” (to use the Husserlian expression, 1983, pp. 59–60), and suspends the validity of the very basic social and political conditions within which everyone is born, including national identity, constitutional laws, social roles, communitarian affiliations, beliefs and ideals, even hopes. The concern Wahl expressed with his question to Levinas during the abovementioned 1962 discussion, related to the utility of the State, should be read in this context. And it is in this sense, this writer believes, that in the 1990 Prefatory Note to his *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*, Levinas noted that “[w]e must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject” (1990b, p. 63). Such a rhetorical question is still valid, a fortiori, thirty years later, and it assumes a euphemistic nuance in the face of unrestrained

neoliberalism. It is possible for a phenomenologically oriented radical political enquiry to rely on the same inalienable power evoked by Butler, the power that each and every one of us has to think and pose questions neither rhetorically, nor ideologically, but reflexively (2015, p. 198). One significant question concerns the pluralism of forms of life in the face of “the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (Foucault, 1978, pp. 139–140), performed by that biopower against which, not unlike sovereign power, ‘it is necessary to defend subjectivity.’

## References

- Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Introduction by Margaret Canovan. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Benveniste, É. (2016). *Dictionary of Indo-European concepts and society*. Translated by Elizabeth Palmer; foreword by Giorgio Agamben. Chicago, IL: Hau Books, distributed by University of Chicago Press.
- Bernasconi, R. (2002). What is the question to which ‘substitution’ is the answer?. In: S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (234–251). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernasconi, R. (2018). “Subjectivity Must Be Defended”: Substitution, Entanglement, and the Prehistory of the Me in Levinas. In: M.L. Morgan (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas* (259–278). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bergo, B.G. (1999). *Levinas between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth*. Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Academic.
- Butler, J. (2015). *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

- Calin, R. (2005). *Levinas et l'exception du soi*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Critchley, S. (2002). Introduction. In: S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (1–32). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1999). A Word of Welcome. In: J. Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (15–123 and 135–152). Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ferrarese, E. (2016). Vulnerability: A Concept with Which to Undo the World As It Is?. *Critical Horizons*. n.2. vol.17 (149–159), Doi: 10.1080/14409917.2016.1153885.
- Ferrarese, E. (2018). *Vulnerability and Critical Theory*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Farin, I. & J. Malpas, eds. (2016). *Reading Heidegger's Black Notebooks 1931–1941*. London and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated from the French by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (2003). "Society must be defended": lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. General editors, François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador.
- Franck, D. (2008). *L'un-pour-l'autre. Levinas et la signification*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Heidegger, M., K. Harries, and H. Heidegger. (1985). The Self-Assertion of the German University: Address, Delivered on the Solemn Assumption of the Rectorate of the University Freiburg the Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts. *The Review of Metaphysics*. n.3; vol.38, (467–502).

- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. First book*. Translated by Fred Kersten. The Hague, Boston, and Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher.
- Janicaud, D. (1996). The Question of Subjectivity in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. In: S. Critchley & P. Dews (eds.). *Deconstructive Subjectivities* (47–58 and 225–228). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Levinas, E. (1978). *Existence and Existents*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague, Boston, and London: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher.
- Levinas, E. (1979). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague, Boston, and London: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher.
- Levinas, E. (1985). Secrecy and Freedom. In: E. Levinas, *Ethics and infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (73–81). Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1986). The Trace of the Other (1963). In: E. Levinas, *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (345–359). Edited by Mark C. Taylor. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Levinas, E. (1987). *Collected Philosophical Papers of Emmanuel Levinas*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher.
- Levinas, E. (1989). *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by Seán Hand. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Levinas, E. (1990a). Signature. In: E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (291–295). Translated by Seán Hand. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1990b). Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism. Edited and translated by Seán Hand. *Critical Inquiry*. n.1. vol. 17 (62–71).

- Levinas, E. (1996). *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Edited by Simon Critchley, Adriaan T. Peperzak, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1998a). *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Translated by Bettina G. Bergo. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1998b). Diachrony and Representation. In: E. Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (159–177). Translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1998c). Uniqueness. In: E. Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (189–196). Translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1999). Peace and Proximity. In: E. Levinas, *Alterity and transcendence* (131–144). Translated by Michael B. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Levinas, E. (2000). *God, Death, and Time*. Translated By Bettina G. Bergo. Preface by Jacques Rolland. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Levinas, E. (2003a). *On Escape / De l'évasion*. Translated By Bettina G. Bergo. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Levinas, E. (2003b). *Humanism of the Other*. Translated by Nidra Poller. Introduction by Richard A. Cohen. Urbana and Chicago, IL: Illinois University Press.
- Levinas, E. (2011). *Otherwise than being or Beyond essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Peperzak, A.T. (1980). Devenir autre. In: J.-F. Laruelle (ed.), *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas* (89–103). Paris: Éditions Jean-Michel Place.
- Richardson, W.J. (2003). The Self-Assertion of the German University. In: W.J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (255–258). Preface by Martin Heidegger. New York: Fordham University Press.

- Ricœur, P. (2004). *Otherwise: A Reading of Emmanuel Levinas's Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. *Yale French Studies*. vol.104 (82–99). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3182506>
- Tahmasebi-Birgani, V. (2014). *Emmanuel Levinas and the Politics of Non-Violence*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Visker, R. (1999). *Truth and Singularity. Taking Foucault into Phenomenology*. Dordrecht: Springer Verlag.
- Vogel, Lawrence. 2008. Emmanuel Levinas and the Judaism of the Good Samaritan. *Levinas Studies*. Vol. 3 (193–208).