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EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND THE DEFORMALIZATION OF TIME

When asked toward the end of his long career what he was working on, Levinas responded to his interviewers: “My work is to further the deformalization of time” (It is Righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas, p. 209). The deformalization of time is a project that Levinas had been engaged in since the late 1940s with the appearance of Existence and Existents and Time and the Other. It is central to Levinas’s work and indicates an ongoing and infinite task. The deformalization of time involves the task of speaking philosophy in such a way that the abstract ‘formalism’ of philosophic discourse becomes an infinite conversation that takes place within the time of others. ‘Ana-chronically,’ this involves the recognition that I enter a conversation that both precedes and exceeds me temporally. It begins with explaining, or justifying oneself in relation to the other, and presupposes an inner history of the other: the other’s absent past, present and future.

My purpose in this article is to present some preliminary reflections on Levinas’s continuing work on the deformalization of time. This task will involve us in a discussion of diachrony, absence, otherness, and transcendence. It is important to keep in mind that Levinas’s undertaking in what he calls “the deformalization of time,” however technical this becomes, aims at transforming, in the words of Rudolf Bernet, “the egological transcendental subject into an ethical subject, one which is characterized not by its spontaneous, free power, but by a responsibility for the other, which comes from the other” (The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, p. 90). This transformation is achieved by demonstrating that even at the level of sensibility, the other approaches me in his or her vulnerability. This vulnerability I recognize as coming from outside the subject. The re-humanization of philosophy begins with the responsibility that comes with this re-cognition. It is affectivity that, originating from the other, transforms my sensibility at its origin into what we might call an “ethical susceptivity.” Levinas links this humanizing transformation to a reconceptualization of time itself. For the subject on its way to subjectivity, hetero-affection precedes auto-affection (The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, p. 90). What emerges from Levinas’s deformalization of time is no less than the temporalization of ethical life.

In order to better understand how Levinas links ethics to temporality, it is important to situate Levinas's thoughts on time in their existential and philosophical context. The post-modern world is marked by a sense of abandonment by and from previously sustaining certainties, whether the absolutes of religion, the imperatives of morality, or the grand meta-narrative of history. After Auschwitz, Levinas assumes the awesome philosophic responsibility of coming to grips with the disorientation experienced in virtually every sphere of human activity. This means responding to the entire burden and legacy of the Western philosophical tradition since its inception, and more precisely, attempting to bridge the separation between fact and value, subject and object, sense and understanding, ethics and ontology, humanism and transcendence, reason and justice.

Modern philosophy, with roots leading back to Plato and Aristotle, tends to conceive of temporality in terms of an indifferent progression of discrete instants. The Cartesian mindset, in particular, implies a unidirectional temporal progress whereby the laws of nature would become transparent, the laws of human nature collated and codified, and universal knowledge beckons as a realistic aspiration. However, with the objectification of knowledge set in motion by Descartes, the ‘spatializing’ of existence, giving it its objective frame of reference, its numerical character and ultimately its digitalized application, creates a chasm between experience and understanding. Moreover, temporality is reduced to an infinite series of points that can be mapped out on coordinates. Homogeneous, quantifiable, infinitely divisible, such mathematical time is indifferent to orientation and virtually indistinguishable from space. The triumph of human beings over the resistance of the physical world occurs at the expense of a devaluation of lived experience, and a diminished sense of time.

From time understood as mathematical or “clock time,” lived-time must be recovered and restored to a place of irreducible importance. This is, in part, what Levinas means by the “deformalization” of time. In his first major work, *Husserl’s Theory of Intuition*, Levinas clarifies the patterns of human temporality sedimented over by the “natural attitude;” that is, the idea that time measured by number is “real” time. Husserl’s theory of internal time consciousness describes the relation of past, present, and future without reducing time to a series of points measured by number. Retention, impression, and protension each have a distinctive phase that make time both continuous for the human subject, and distinguishable as past, present, and future in terms of intentional consciousness.